

Lost your job? Pfizer may offer free drugs

A program will help those laid off this year.

Associated Press

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Pfizer says it will provide 70 of its most widely prescribed prescription drugs — including Lipitor and Viagra — for free to people who have lost their jobs and health insurance.

The world's biggest drug-maker said Thursday it will give away the medicines for up to a year to Americans who lost jobs since Jan. 1 and have been on the Pfizer drug for three months or more.

More on the Web



For a complete list of the medications covered and for a link to Pfizer's application, go to links.tampabay.com.

The announcement comes amid massive job losses caused by the recession and a campaign in Washington to rein in health care costs and extend coverage. The move could earn Pfizer
» See PFIZER, 8A

goodwill in that debate after long being a target of critics of drug prices and sales practices.

The program also likely will help keep those patients loyal to Pfizer brands.

"Everybody knows now a neighbor, a relative who has lost their job and is losing their insurance. People are definitely hurting out there," said Dr. Jorge

Puente, Pfizer's head of pharmaceuticals outside the United States and Europe and a champion of the project.

The idea for the program came just five weeks ago, at a leadership training meeting, as the workers discussed how patients are struggling, Puente said.

He said he urged top management to approve the program,

presenting a recent Associated Press article about how newly uninsured diabetics are suffering serious complications because they can no longer afford the medicines and testing supplies.

Officials for New York-based Pfizer said they don't know how much the program will cost and haven't capped spending on it.

Applications will be accepted

through Dec. 31, with medication provided for up to 12 months after approval — or until the person becomes insured again.

Starting Thursday, patients can call a toll-free number, 1-866-706-2400, to sign up, and those whose drugs are not included in the program will be referred to other company aid programs. Starting July 1, patients can also apply through the Web site PfizerHelpfulAnswers.com, which has information about the other Pfizer aid programs.

Pfizer's program comes at a time when many drugmakers,

including Pfizer, have been raising prices on their drugs, partly to offset declines in revenue as the recession reduces the number of prescriptions people can afford to fill.

The 70-plus drugs covered in the program include several diabetes drugs and some of Pfizer's top moneymakers, from cholesterol fighter Lipitor and painkiller Celebrex to Viagra for impotence. Drugs from other classes such as antibiotics, antidepressants, heart medications and contraceptives also are included.

FAST FACTS

Who's eligible?

Pfizer says those eligible must meet these conditions:

- Laid off after Jan. 1.
- Taking a Pfizer medication at least three months before layoff.
- Lacking insurance.
- Financial hardship.