


# Rx Basics:

## How Your Rx is Filled




U.S. retail pharmacies filled more than 3.6 billion prescriptions in 2008, 261.7 million of them in Texas. A single pharmacy can easily fill several hundred prescriptions in one day. Depending on how busy a pharmacy is and/or on complications with your prescription or insurance coverage, a prescription may require as little as a few minutes to fill -- or several hours.

The steps involved in filling your prescription are carefully executed to balance the critical need to protect your safety (thoroughness and accuracy in dispensing) with efficiency (speed and volume of prescriptions processed). Medication dispensing errors can have serious – and even fatal – consequences, and pharmacists cannot “cut corners” to speed up the process.

The prescription-filling process involves five steps: prescription drop-off, patient profile review, order entry, order fulfillment & final check and pick-up. Delays can occur at any point in the process – these are so noted: 


### Dropping off the Prescription

Upon receiving your prescription, a pharmacy staff member ensures it is complete and correct. The prescription must specify a patient's full name, medication name and dosage, directions for taking, physician's signature, and refill information. If any discrepancies are noted, the pharmacist may need to contact your physician. If your prescription is expired and you have no refills remaining, the pharmacy will have to ask your doctor to authorize a refill. This can take several hours or longer. 

### Patient Profile Review


The pharmacist or pharmacy technician may ask questions about your personal and medical background, especially if you are using that pharmacy for the first time. These questions typically include:

- What is your date of birth?
- What is your address?
- Do you have prescription insurance?
- Do you have any drug allergies?
- Are you taking any other medications that we are not aware of?

You may be asked some of these questions at each visit. Your date of birth is used to confirm your identity in the case of similar names. Insurance information frequently changes, so if you have a new insurance plan, that information will have to be entered into the records and your coverage verified. 

Your pharmacist should maintain current records of all medications you take or have taken. This information is used by the pharmacist to determine if the new drug is compatible with your other medications, safe for you and appropriate to your condition. This is one of the pharmacist's most important tasks, and thoroughness sometimes requires answering multiple questions.

### Order Entry

After gathering all needed information, the pharmacist or technician enters the prescription into the computer. If anything about the name, dosage or availability of the medication is not clear, the pharmacy must contact the physician. 


Pharmacies electronically transmit information to your insurance company, which decides what portion (if any) of the prescription is covered by insurance and what part you are expected to pay (your

"copayment"). If you do not have prescription drug coverage, a computer program assigns pricing based on the medication's average wholesale price (AWP) and other factors. The full retail cost of a prescription reflects the wholesale cost of the medication plus the pharmacy's related dispensing costs.


Following the M.D.'s written order, the pharmacist or technician selects a product from available inventory. In Texas, the pharmacist may substitute a generic equivalent if your doctor has authorized generic substitution. (If your doctor specifies a brand-name drug and that drug is not on your insurance company's "approved" list, you will pay substantially more out of pocket for the prescription.)

### **Order Fulfillment & Final Check**

Once order entry is complete, the pharmacist or technician will place your medication in an appropriate container and label it according to state and federal regulations. If your physician has specified that a special or "custom" medication be prepared for you, the medication must be compounded by the pharmacist. **Compounding** is the mixing of drugs by a pharmacist to meet unique patient needs: changing a solid pill to a liquid, avoiding a non-essential ingredient that the patient is allergic to, or to obtain the exact dose needed. It may also be done to add flavoring to medication for a small child. Medications that are commonly compounded include antibiotics, corticosteroids, thyroid, hormones, pain gels and suppositories. Remember that compounding is a meticulous process and not all pharmacies offer compounding services.

The pharmacist then reviews the completed order, verifying that the drug name, strength, dosing directions and appearance of the medication are all correct. He or she will also verify that the prescription has been filled for the correct patient. This is a critical step in which any discrepancies between the M.D.'s order and the final product are noted and corrected. This part of the process is critical to your safety and welfare and cannot be rushed or skipped, even if the pharmacy is very busy. 

### **Prescription Pick-Up**

When the filled prescription is ready, you complete the payment transaction. During busy periods, you may have to stand in line to pick up your completed prescription. During pick-up, be sure to ask any questions or address any concerns concern your medication. If you are taking a medication for the first time, or the medication is of a restricted type, the pharmacist may be required by law to give you individual counseling at the time of pick-up. 

Most retail pharmacies can process and hand off a single prescription in 10 to 20 minutes if there are no insurance, inventory, preparation or other issues that require special attention. However, it is not uncommon for the process to take half an hour or more during peak times.