

EpiPen cost soars, but it's not the only drug to

By Jacqueline Howard, CNN August 25, 2016

On a hot and sticky summer day in Manhattan, Nicole Levin was leaving a dentist appointment when it happened. The 41-year-old New Yorker exited a subway train, walked up a flight of concrete stairs to the bustling city street, and suddenly felt her tongue and throat swell. She started to sweat. She felt nauseous, short of breath and couldn't swallow.

If Levin let any more time pass, she knew she wouldn't be able to breathe. She frantically opened her purse, wrapped her fingers around an EpiPen, and jammed it into her thigh beneath her workout pants. Immediately, she felt her throat open. She took in a deep breath of air -- a sigh of relief. "That was really scary, because usually I can do it at home or something and this time I didn't know what hit me. I just pulled it out and had to do it right in the subway," said Levin, who has a combination of environmental, food and medication allergies, often leading to cross-reactivity.

Just moments earlier, Levin received a tooth implant at her dentist appointment. She told the clinicians that she was allergic to amoxicillin, an antibiotic that can treat infections, she said. However, they prescribed a medication that was still in the same penicillin family, which she said caused the reaction. And what does that life-saving medication cost her?" Right now, it's \$200 each or even \$300." For some, it costs even more.

EpiPen price hike hits hard at school

The EpiPen is an auto-injector that delivers epinephrine, more commonly known as adrenaline, a hormone that can help to relax muscles. It can open the airways, and reduce swelling during a severe allergic reaction. **Indeed, the price of an EpiPen standard two-pack gradually grew to about \$600. The same two-pack cost only about \$100 in 2009.**

However, after recent uproar about the cost increase, pharmaceutical company Mylan, maker of the EpiPen, announced on Thursday that it will provide patients with instant savings cards to cover up to \$300 of out-of-pocket costs.

Meanwhile, epinephrine, which can be purchased alone, costs just a few dollars. The EpiPen offers a portable way to administer doses. "Some patients and physicians are resorting to buying epinephrine ampoules and filling their own syringes," said Dr. Thomas Casale, a professor of medicine at the University of South Florida and executive vice president of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology (AAAAI).

Many adults and families of children with severe allergies are facing sticker shock when they pay for their EpiPens, especially amid back-to-school season.

Theresa Ray, a 30-year-old mother in Cincinnati, was surprised to find that purchasing two EpiPen two-packs for her 6-year-old son would have cost her family about \$1,300, she said. Her son was diagnosed with food allergies five years ago.

"When we first bought them (about five years ago), it was around \$100 or \$150 for a twinpack, and at that time I remember thinking, 'Wow, that's kind of expensive.' Then, the next year, I found out they expired and we have to get them every year. They were more expensive, but by that time, only a couple hundred dollars," Ray said.

"Last year, we spent around \$650 for a twinpack and this year, same thing," she said. "It was funny, I told my husband, 'I wonder why no one's talking about this. It's really weird no one's talking about EpiPens.' ... And then, I saw a news article on Facebook about it."

The soaring cost of prescription drugs explained

Net spending on prescription drugs by consumers in the United States has increased about 20% between 2013 and 2015, according to a new paper published in the Journal of the American Medical Association on Tuesday. Prescription drugs also cost about twice as much in the United States compared to other advanced nations.

In other words, EpiPens are not the only prescription drugs with steep price hikes. **For instance, when Turing Pharmaceuticals increased the cost of Daraprim, a drug used by some cancer and AIDS patients, from \$13.50 to \$750 last year, it sparked outrage.** The pharmaceutical company's former CEO was Martin Shkreli, known as "pharma bro." Albuterol, an asthma medicine, has also increased in price in recent years.

A House of Representatives report found in 2014 that 10 generic drugs experienced price increases just a year prior, ranging from a 420% hike to more than 8,000%.

Now, the new study suggests that a combination of market exclusivity provisions granted to drug manufacturers, and coverage requirements imposed on government-funded drug benefits, are both driving the high costs of prescription drugs nationwide.