



# Getting ahead of 3 trends driving the pharmacy market

How to safeguard your pharmacy benefit in an era of rising drug costs

[Continue](#)

**Optum** Rx<sup>®</sup>

# Managing the rising cost of prescription drugs has always been a concern for plan sponsors. As new but more expensive drugs have continued to enter the market, it has become even more difficult.

Biologic drugs have been a leading cause of rising prescription drug spending for many years. [Biosimilars](#) were expected to be a less-costly option for expensive, branded biologic drugs. But complex patent issues meant few biosimilars ever made it to market. Now, after many delays, biosimilars are beginning to deliver on that promise in 2023.

More recent are a new wave of weight loss medications called [GLP-1 agonists](#). Drugs like Wegovy® can produce weight loss comparable to bariatric surgery in many patients. While gaining popularity with patients, this class of medication has plan sponsors concerned because of their very high cost and questions regarding their long-term use.

Finally, [gene therapies](#) are a true revolution in how we treat certain genetic diseases. By permanently modifying a person's genetic code to get at the root cause of disease, gene therapies offer new hope to people with a wide range of diseases. Yet, with costs that can top \$3 million per treatment, they require a fundamental rethinking of how we pay for high-cost drugs.

## 3 ways to save

- 1 Harness the powers of biosimilars**  

- 2 Apply clinical rigor to weight loss drugs**  

- 3 Account for gene therapy risk**  


# 1 Harness the power of biosimilars

Biosimilars aren't completely new. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the first biosimilar in 2015. However, until recently, the number of biosimilars available in the U.S. was fairly limited.

Like generics, biosimilars can only enter the market after the original brand product is no longer protected by patents. To offer a biosimilar, a manufacturer must demonstrate that its drug is highly similar to and has no clinically meaningful differences in terms of safety, purity and potency from an existing, FDA-approved biologic, also known as a reference product.

Humira® is a biologic drug used by more than a million patients living with serious inflammatory diseases. The first biosimilar competitor for Humira arrived in the U.S. market in January 2023 and several other options are now available.

To ensure choice and improve affordability for patients and plan sponsors, Optum Rx continues to expand access to biosimilar alternatives for Humira, with three biosimilar options recently added to the Optum Rx standard formulary.



**The price of popular brand-name biologics can drop up to 60% when biosimilars arrive.<sup>1</sup>**

“We developed a clear set of biosimilar guiding principles for our Humira biosimilar strategy. This included maintaining clinical quality of care, flexibility, and choice. It involved ensuring that we significantly improve our clients’ net cost in the category, ensure stability of supply, and then importantly, minimize patient disruption.”

**- Savitha Vivian,**  
Optum Rx Senior Vice  
President, Formulary  
Management and Strategy



## 2 Apply clinical rigor to weight loss medications

Since entering the market in 2022, the weight loss drug Wegovy has become a household name as celebrities tout their dramatic results while taking the drug. Not surprisingly, utilization has surged.

However, for plan sponsors, the decision to cover GLP-1 drugs for weight loss isn't straightforward. Up to 130 million Americans could potentially qualify for these medications, which now cost over \$1,300 per month. That's why an approach combining managed formulary access with rigorous member requirements is essential.

[Our new Optum Weight Engage program](#) deploys various program configurations for plans to adopt when covering weight loss medications on benefit. It starts by managing the foundation of the benefit design and extends into member support programs. Plans choose their utilization management strategy, apply enhanced system edits to manage claims, and finally choose whether to connect members with a program designed to support them throughout their weight loss journey. Weight Engage offers flexibility for clients while delivering comprehensive strategies to manage utilization across a benefit.



**Put simply, never before have so many people been eligible for such an expensive drug.**

“Our solution pulls together several components to help plans manage their weight loss drug costs, help members achieve their weight loss, and ensure sustained weight loss long-term to improve their overall health.”

**- Dr. Travis Baughn,**  
Optum Rx Vice President  
of Clinical Solutions



### 3 Account for gene therapy risk

Gene therapies come with new logistical and procedural complexities for providers, patients, and plan sponsors. Since the first FDA-approved gene therapy launched in 2017, only a handful have come to market. Moreover, most of these gene therapies have been aimed at curing extremely rare diseases.

This is changing as the gene therapy pipeline continues to grow and researchers target more common diseases impacting larger populations. Roctavian was approved in June 2023 for the treatment of adults with hemophilia A, an inherited blood clotting disease. Hemophilia A is estimated to occur in 12 per 100,000 males in the U.S. **The cost of Roctavian is \$2.9 million for a one-time dose.**

Gene Therapy	Year	Condition
Luxturna®	2017	Hereditary form of blindness
Zolgensma®	2019	Spinal muscular atrophy
Skysona®	2022	CALD, genetic disorder attacking nerves in brain and spine of children
Zynteglo®	2022	Beta-thalassemia, a blood disorder
Hemgenix®	2022	Hemophilia B
Adstiladrin®	2022	Rare bladder cancer
Elevidys	2023	Duchenne muscular dystrophy
Roctavian™	2023	Hemophilia A

With such costs, gene therapies come with unprecedented financial risks for plan sponsors. This is especially true for smaller or mid-sized groups, where a million-dollar claim for a gene therapy may exceed their expected annual pharmacy drug spend.

That's why new thinking is required. To help plan sponsors manage the risk exposure to gene therapies, we created **Optum Gene Therapy Risk Protection**. This risk management approach reduces the volatility presented by catastrophic claims for gene therapies by spreading out the cost into a manageable, predictable per member per month (PMPM) fee for plan sponsors.





## At Optum Rx, we track the most important trends in pharmacy and proactively create innovative solutions tailored to the emerging needs of plan sponsors.



[Reach out to us](#) and we'll connect you with a representative to discuss the full range of cost-saving solutions we offer.



Read about the latest [pharmacy trends, industry news and Optum Rx innovations.](#)



Hear from Optum Rx thought leaders on our [podcast](#).

### About Optum Rx

Optum Rx is a pharmacy care services company helping clients and more than 60 million members achieve better health outcomes and lower overall costs through innovative prescription drug benefits services.



#### References:

1. Fresenius Kabi USA, LLC. Biosimilars: Realizing the potential in the US. Published March 8, 2023. Accessed February 9, 2023.



**Images throughout this e-book are stock and illustrative only.**

All Optum® trademarks are owned by Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are trademarks or registered marks of their respective owners.

© 2023 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved. M58561 087/23