

Half Price: Who Can Get the Medicine Now?



Built from *The Sticker Price of a Miracle* by Peter Lee, Health Editor

Grades 4–8 · About 45 minutes · ★ everyone · ★★ older readers

Name _____

Date _____

1. Before You Read

★ When a store puts something on sale for half price, does that mean everyone can buy it now? Why or why not?

★ Think of something useful that costs a lot of money. What could make it easier for more people to get it?

2. The Short Version

Read this first. Older readers: read the full article too.

For two years, some of the most effective weight-loss medicines ever made had a "velvet rope" around them, like the rope that keeps people out of a fancy party. They cost more than a thousand dollars a month. Insurance, which helps people pay for medical care, often said no. Medicare, a big government health plan, was not allowed by law to pay for weight-loss treatment at all.

Then the rope moved. The White House made deals with the two big companies that make the medicines. The **cash price**, what you pay when no insurance helps, dropped to about \$350 a month. That is about half of what people without insurance paid before. A government website began selling the medicines at that price. Medicare also planned to start covering the treatment for some patients in the middle of the year, with a \$50 copay. A copay is the small part of the bill the patient pays.

Peter calls this real relief. But he reads the fine print. First, \$350 is still a lot of money, and some families can't spare it. Second, the deal is not a law, so it could change. Third, more people wanting the medicine means more people needing a doctor, and doctors' offices are already crowded.

Peter's lesson: for two years, what kept people out was **income**. The rope moved. Did it move enough?

3. Word Bank

Word	What it means
coverage	when an insurance plan agrees to help pay for a kind of medical care
copay	the small, set amount a patient pays when insurance covers the rest
eligibility	the rules that decide who is allowed to get something
statute	a law that has been officially passed
bottleneck	a narrow spot where things get stuck and have to wait, like the neck of a bottle

★ Use **bottleneck** in a sentence of your own.

4. Check Your Understanding

★ 1. Before this winter, about how much did these medicines cost each month at their list price?

☐ about \$50 ☐ about \$350 ☐ over \$1,000

★ 2. Who made the deals that lowered the price?

★ 3. What was Medicare not allowed to do before this change?

★ 4. Peter says "cash price is not coverage." Who does a lower cash price help, and who does it still leave out?

★★ 5. Peter says patients are "building on an agreement, not a statute." Why does that matter so much for medicines people need to keep taking for a long time?

5. Peter's Reach Check

Peter has a rule: a cure that doesn't reach people is just a press release. So whenever he sees big news about a medicine, he checks who it actually reaches. Run Peter's Reach Check on this story.

	Your answer
What actually happened? Just the facts: who made a deal, and what changed about the price.	
Who did it reach? Who does the lower price help the most?	
What would it take to reach more people? Name two things that still stand in the way.	
What might a headline leave out? Write a short "half price" headline, then one important fact it leaves out.	

6. Think Deeper

★ Peter writes that "for two years the miracle had a velvet rope, and the rope was income." What do you think he means? Why is a velvet rope a good picture for this problem?

★★ Peter warns that "eligibility rules are where access quietly gets rationed after the cameras leave." Why might the rules written after a big announcement matter more than the announcement itself?

7. Write Your Report

Write a short report answering this question: **Did the price deal open the door to these medicines for everyone who needs them, or only for some people?**

- My answer:
- Reason 1 (from the article):
- Reason 2 (from the article):
- One thing the other side would say:
- My conclusion:

For Teachers and Parents: Answer Key

Word bank sentence: Answers vary; check that the student uses bottleneck to mean a narrow spot where things get stuck or have to wait.

1. Over \$1,000.
2. The White House and the two big companies that make the medicines.
3. Medicare was barred by law from covering weight loss at all.
4. It helps people who can pay cash every month, such as a middle-income patient with no insurance. It does nothing by itself for a family that cannot spare \$350 any more than it could spare \$1,000.
5. The lower prices came from a deal, not a law, so they can "un-happen" if the companies or the administration change their minds. These are long-term medicines: when people stop taking them, the weight generally comes back. A patient planning years of treatment could lose access partway through.

Reach Check (sample answers): What happened: the White House made deals with the two big manufacturers; the cash price fell to roughly \$346 to \$350 a month, about half the old price for uninsured patients; a federal website began selling at that price; and Medicare planned to cover treatment for some patients starting mid-year with a \$50 copay. Who it reached: middle-income patients with no insurance who can pay cash each month. What it would take: answers may include prices lower than \$350, real coverage instead of only a cash discount, fair eligibility rules, a lasting law instead of a deal, and enough doctor appointments. What a headline leaves out: answers vary; good ones note that \$350 is still too much for some families, that the deal is not a law, or that patients still need an appointment with a prescriber.

Think deeper: Open answers. For the ★ question, strong answers explain that the medicines worked, but only people with enough money could get past the "rope," so income decided who got treated. For the ★★ question, strong answers explain that an announcement gets attention, but the detailed rules about who qualifies are written later, when fewer people are watching, and those rules decide who actually gets the medicine.

Report: Look for a clear answer, two reasons taken from the article (for example: the price fell by about half; \$350 is still out of reach for some families; the deal could change; doctor appointments are a new bottleneck), a fair statement of the other side (for example: Peter calls it the biggest affordability move on any drug class in years), and a conclusion that matches the answer.