How do physicians decide when to prescribe a medication?

There is a vast amount of literature focusing on factors that influence physicians’ prescribing habits, and the findings are not always easy to understand. Interview studies are not very reliable since it is difficult to determine whether physicians’ answers reflect what they actually do as opposed to what they think they should do. To complicate matters further, there are major differences between and within countries. General practitioners and specialists vary substantially in their prescribing habits. In short, the drug selection process is not always rational.

What influences the decisions made by clinicians?
After a diagnosis is made, the first questions typically are “Is the patient’s condition treatable?” and “Is the patient a suitable candidate for treatment?” Fortunately, effective and safe medications are available for many diseases and conditions. In many circumstances, physicians recommend treatment even if symptoms are mild and even if it’s likely that the condition might resolve without any action. Thus, doctors tend to “overtreat” symptoms, often to meet patients’ expectations.

After a physician decides to treat a patient, the next step is to prescribe a specific medication out of many possible choices. The physicians must determine whether the benefit–harm balance of a medication applies to individual patients, and they often rely on medications they are most familiar with. There are nearly 2,000 medications with different active ingredients on the market in the U.S., and no physician could possibly remember how all of them work, what their recommended doses are or what their potential adverse effects may be. Since many medications (containing the same generic compound) may be manufactured by different companies (and sold under different brand names), and since many medications are available in different dosage forms, the number of marketed products is much higher (more than 10,000).

The doctor’s selection is not entirely objective; it is not based solely on scientific facts. It should, however, be reassuring to patients that the most commonly prescribed medications for a given disease or condition have more similarities than dissimilarities.
Chapter 2 - How do physicians decide when to prescribe a medication?
Two additional factors that influence physicians’ prescribing habits are patients’ desires and the cost of a particular medication.

**What is the patient’s role?**
Patients should participate in the decision to treat. They need to know as much as possible about a medication’s benefits and potential adverse reactions. Patients need to understand how to take the medication, what the dose is, how long to take the medication, and what they need to do if they suspect that the medication is causing unwanted reactions. It is also important for the treating physician to convey the importance of taking the medication as prescribed, since the suggested treatment regimen often yields the desired outcome.

Encouraging patients to follow the prescribed treatment, however, must be tempered with realistic expectations. No guarantees can be given. Nonetheless, an informed patient is always better off.

Unfortunately, many patients leave their clinic visits relatively uninformed and unaware of the importance of complying with the prescribed treatment regimen. A surprising number of patients never even go to the pharmacy to fill their prescriptions! As a patient, you should not hesitate to ask for more information if you feel that your physician has not satisfied your need to be fully informed. This is your right.

**Is the cost of medication considered?**
The price of a prescribed medication is not often discussed between the physician and the patient, but it should be. One reason is that drug prices aren’t well known by all physicians. Patients, on the other hand, may be more interested in knowing how much they have to pay, since medications can be expensive. There are a variety of health plans with different co-payment schedules. Patients seeking to limit the cost of their medications should ask if suitable generic medications are available (see Chapter 8).

**Do external factors influence physicians’ treatment decisions?**
It has been documented that doctors are influenced by their peers, in particular their local opinion leaders. In every community there are physicians who are highly respected by their peers, and these physicians are the opinion leaders. These leaders are often targeted by drug companies for promotional purposes.

The pharmaceutical companies have very skillful tactics to “convince” doctors to prescribe their products. Marketing tools range from coffee mugs and pens to “promotional trips” targeting desirable destinations and lucrative consulting agreements. Efforts are underway to restrict excessive marketing of medications to physicians.
Key messages

✔ Several factors are considered by physicians during the selection of a medication.
✔ This selection is not entirely objective.
✔ Patients should help decide when and how to treat.
✔ The cost of a medication is an important consideration.
✔ Drug makers have skillful tactics to encourage physicians to prescribe their products.