

## **Publix to offer 7 popular prescription antibiotics for free**

By DAVID ROYSE- Associated Press Writer

CAPE CORAL, Fla. (AP) -- Publix supermarket chain is going further than most retailers trying to lure shoppers into their stores with low-cost prescription drugs, announcing Monday it will offer seven antibiotics for free.

"It can't be any more affordable than free," said Gov. Charlie Crist, who went to a suburban Fort Myers Publix store to help the company announce the initiative and laud it for a "great corporate ethic."

The seven oral antibiotics, representing the most commonly filled at the chain's pharmacies, will be available at no cost to anyone with a prescription as often as they need them, Publix CEO Charlie Jenkins Jr. said. Fourteen-day supplies of the seven drugs will be available at all 684 of the chain's pharmacies in five Southern states.

The prescription antibiotics available under the program are **amoxicillin, cephalexin, penicillin VK, erythromycin, ampicillin, sulfamethoxazole/trimethoprim, and ciprofloxacin.**

Wal-Mart Stores Inc., Kmart and other retailers already offer discounted drug programs. But Publix Super Markets Inc. officials say the company is the first large regional chain to offer certain drugs at no cost. In addition to Florida, the company operates stores in Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama and Tennessee.

With health care costs one of the biggest challenges facing many Americans, Crist said that the private sector's involvement in the solution was "a great trend."

Jenkins acknowledged that increasing pharmacy sales was a part of the company's motivation, but said the company also wanted to contribute to that trend.

"Frankly, we're interested in building our pharmacy business," Jenkins said. "But moreover, we want to help the citizens of our state have affordable health care, and we thought this was just a good start in doing that."

Richard Hastings, senior retail analyst with Bernard Sands LLC, said he wasn't surprised Publix was joining the effort to cut retail prescription costs.

"It's not hard to do, certain generic prescriptions are running at very low costs per volume, so it's easy to use this as a marketing lure," Hastings said.

He noted that if a generic drug already sells at less than \$10 without an insurance co-pay, the company could justify losing that amount as a marketing expense that could be made up for with more store traffic.

"Publix is already strong on customer loyalty, so this only strengthens their loyalty and comparable store sales," Hastings said.

Jenkins said he didn't know how much the effort would cost the Lakeland-based, employee-owned company, because company officials didn't know how many people would take advantage of it.

Dr. Andrew Agwunobi, secretary of Florida's Agency for Health Care Administration and a pediatrician, said many of the antibiotics are prescribed for children, and he noted that Florida has 3.6 million uninsured people and many who have some insurance but no coverage for prescription drugs.

"So I hope (Publix stores) are ready," Agwunobi said, predicting a heavy response.

Barbara Lemay, who was shopping in the Publix where Crist and the company made the announcement, said it would be a good start for her.

"I've been on antibiotics occasionally, and to get anything free with the price of medications today is phenomenal," she said. "People just can't afford the medications. You have no insurance, you're looking at hundreds of dollars a month."

Lemay, who gets Social Security benefits, said if she is prescribed one of the antibiotics she definitely would go to Publix to get it, and said it could save her "thousands of dollars."

The drugs that will be available for free under the program include Ciprofloxacin, a common antibiotic used to treat certain infections, including urinary tract infections, and infections caused by E. coli bacteria. But it is probably better known to the public as a drug that is used to treat anthrax exposure.

Penicillin, and penicillin-like drugs, including amoxicillin, are among the most commonly prescribed antibiotics, used to treat a wide variety of infections. Amoxicillin is often used to treat children's ear infections.

Publix officials said that the range of antibiotics chosen for the program was based on how often the company's pharmacists fill prescriptions for those drugs, and different types of antibiotics were chosen so patients who may not be able to use one because of an allergy or because it doesn't work for them, may be able to still get another for free.

Some public health officials have raised concerns about increasing use of some antibiotics because their overuse causes them to become less effective as the bacteria they target develop immunity.

The Publix initiative might contribute to that if doctors were to respond by increasing the number of prescriptions they write for the particular antibiotics the company is offering for free, said Lisa McGiffert, a health policy analyst for the Consumers Union, publisher of Consumer Reports, which has raised some concerns about antibiotic resistance.

"But I do believe there are many people who do not fill those prescriptions because of the cost, and certainly making this medication free is going to help those people," McGiffert said. "As long as doctors are conscientiously prescribing antibiotics, this is going to help a lot of people."

Wal-Mart last year started offering hundreds of prescription drugs of all different kinds, ranging from diabetes medication to high blood pressure drugs, for \$4. It hopes it can draw more shoppers into its stores who may come for prescriptions and then stay to buy in other departments.

Kmart, a unit of Sears Holding Corp., began last month offering a 90-day supply of generic drugs for \$15. Now, more than 300 drugs are included in that program.