

The distribution of prescription medications in the United States of America is handled in a much different manner than it is in the European Union. Let's take a moment to examine the differences and see how it affects the consumer.

In the United States, prescription drugs in pill form are sold in bulk containers. Up to a thousand pills or capsules can be packaged in these containers. They are distributed by the caseload to wholesalers, and then, in turn, to pharmacies. The required number of pills to be dispensed is counted from these containers, either by hand or with the use of an automatic pill counter. This is known, for obvious reasons, as a Pour and Count system. Both the United States and Canada use this system.

The European Union, on the other hand, employs what is called a Unit Of Use system. Pills and capsules are sold in blister packs. These packages come with safety instructions and pre-printed bar codes. Obviously, these packages come in a variety of pill numbers and medicine dosage. Many of them contain pills counted in multiples of seven: 7, 14, 21, etc.

There are pros and cons to both approaches. The American system cuts down on environmental waste, because there is simply less packaging involved. There is less to throw away with the Pour and Count system, and in our increasingly green society, this is valid. Furthermore, the Pour and Count system prevents patients from having to overpay for medications. Let's say a patient in Toledo needs a month's supply of Plavix. That's usually going to mean 31 pills. So the pharmacist counts out 31 pills and gives them to the patient. In Gdańsk, the same patient would get, perhaps, a blisterpack with 28 pills in it. Then the pharmacist has to CUT another blisterpack apart to provide the remaining three pills.

In most European health care systems, this does not pose a problem – everything is socialized, so the cost is not passed on to the patient. In America, though, this is a gigantic problem. It can raise the patient's cost up to 25% or more. Especially in tough economic times like these, the health care system cannot bear this kind of extra cost. In Canada and the United States, it makes much more sense to use the Pour and Count system.