

Sask. government to pay for 2 arthritis drugs

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[CBC News](#)

The Saskatchewan government has decided to pay for two expensive drugs used to treat ankylosing spondylitis, a crippling form of arthritis.

The Health Department said Thursday it will include Enbrel and Humira on the list of drugs it pays for to treat the disease.

Coverage started Feb. 15. The drugs cost about \$20,000 per treatment and are expected to cost the treasury an extra \$1 million a year, the provincial government said.

In November, an arthritis advocacy group called on the Saskatchewan government to pay for both drugs, plus a third — Remicade.

At the time, the committee that studies which drugs should be added to the province's plan said the clinical benefit of the three did not justify their cost.

Remicade was not added to the list of drugs funded to treat ankylosing spondylitis in Thursday's announcement.

The government said Remicade costs \$5,000 more a year than the other two.

A national arthritis group says that's a small price to pay for getting someone out of bed and back into the work force.

Cheryl Koehn, a B.C.-based advocate for people with severe forms of arthritis, said she doesn't understand the decision to pay for only two of three effective treatments.

"Patients can only ever be on one of these three medications, so this isn't going to increase their cost envelope at all," she said.

"That they're making two available and not three does not make clinical or scientific sense. It's like, again, saying we've done 98 per cent of our job and we're going to call it quits, when to go the remaining two per cent of the distance is easy."

The Arthritis Society's Saskatchewan spokesperson, Donna Adams, said the announcement opens the door to better drug coverage in future.

"I guess we're at least starting in the right direction," she said.

The government also approved several other drugs for coverage Thursday.

They include:

- Myozyme, used to treat a rare metabolic disorder in infants called Pompe disease.

- Hepsara/Baraclude, for the treatment of hepatitis B.
- Ciprodex, a drug for treating ear infections.

The province's drug plan currently covers about 3,700 drug products. In 2006-07 fiscal year, the plan paid out about \$200 million, representing about half the costs of the prescriptions it processes.