Know Your Benefits

How to Lower Health Care Costs

The cost of quality health care can be burdensome for many individuals and families, especially when a new illness is diagnosed or an unexpected procedure is needed.

Many illnesses require expensive treatment, and your health is one area where you should not cut corners to save money. However, there are many areas in medicine that have the potential for savings without sacrificing good quality. If you have a minor reason for seeking treatment, or if you're extra cost-conscious about medical care, it can be well worth it to shop around. Just be sure to place your health ahead of your bank account.

One way to help control health care costs is to educate yourself as a health care consumer. Traditionally, patients were told what procedures or treatments were needed, where to receive the treatment and then simply waited for the bill. Many individuals still approach their health care this way because they do not know about alternative solutions.

If you were planning to make a big purchase, such as a television or a car, you would research the various sellers to find the best deal. It may seem odd to do the same with health care, but there are resources to help you find the best value for medical care. Prices vary from facility to facility, so you can receive significant savings for nonemergency procedures by doing some research in advance.

Today, there are many options available for patients to get involved in decisions regarding their health care. The more engaged you are with your medical care and treatment, the more money you can save—while still ensuring high-quality care.

Find the Right Health Care Provider

The first option is to call around to facilities in your area. You may feel uncomfortable, but don't be afraid to be assertive with your questions (and make sure to take good notes).

Prices for treatment can also depend on the organizational setup of your health care provider. While most providers are arranged around a standard fee-for-service system, some, like the Mayo Clinic and the Cleveland Clinic, do not set their prices based on the number of procedures they perform, but rather based on the cost of patients' overall treatment.

Additionally, under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), nonprofit hospitals are required to offer patient assistance programs.

If you incur a substantial hospital bill, do not be afraid to try to negotiate a lower price. Hospitals often negotiate with insurers and other large entities, and it is not uncommon for a hospital to accept a reduced one-time cash payment from a patient to avoid having to set up a payment plan or send the bill to collections.

Finally, see if there is a dental college in your area. Having your dental needs handled by students, under the supervision of professionals, can save you a lot of money. View a list of accredited dental colleges here.

Talk to Your Doctor

Speak openly with your doctor about cost. Although you may be accustomed to following your doctor's recommendations and instructions without question, it is important that you speak up. If something confuses you, ask questions. If your doctor prescribes a medication, ask if there is a generic version or lower-cost option available.

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If your doctor recommends a procedure or test, ask if it is truly essential or if it could be considered "add-on" care. Also ask how new the treatment is and if more established versions exist, as prices for newer treatments are often higher than the products they replace.

You may be surprised by how much you can manage your own medical care just by having discussions with your doctor. This can help you avoid costly, unnecessary procedures and find lower-cost treatment options that can deliver the same results.

Also check with your health insurer—it may offer quality or price comparison tools for plan members.

Other Options for Saving

Aside from speaking with your doctor about cheaper treatment options, there are several cost-cutting measures you can look into on your own before setting foot in a medical facility, including:

- **Amino.** This online service tool enables consumers to research doctors and compare health care costs in their area based on their health insurance plan. While Amino's quote is not a price guarantee, using the health data tool can help give you an idea of how much a procedure or treatment will cost. For more information, visit Amino's [website](#).

- **Online price estimates.** Finding exact prices beforehand is notoriously difficult in the health care industry; however, a host of resources have become available online in recent years, allowing you to at least obtain a rough estimate for a service, or to compare one facility and region against another. You can also see the going rates for services paid by the federal government via Medicare. The Wall Street Journal maintains a list of 23 health care pricing websites [here](#) and a searchable Medicare database [here](#).

- **Prevention.** The best way to avoid high health care costs is to never incur them. There are significantly lower costs associated with maintaining a healthy lifestyle versus an unhealthy one. On top of utilizing free preventive care as part of your ACA-compliant insurance plan, ward off the high expenses associated with chronic disease by living an active and healthy lifestyle, the benefits of which go far beyond saving money.