

In Depth: How To Cut Health Care Costs

Read the full story Allison Van Dusen

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Experts are always suggesting that consumers shop around for their health care, but few of us have time to call a bunch of doctors or hospitals and compare prices. Luckily, you've got a few options. Register for free with the Web site changehealthcare.com, and you can find out what other people are paying for doctor's visits, procedure and prescriptions in your area. Carol.com also provides prices for consumers in Minneapolis/St. Paul and Seattle.

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How To Cut Health Care Costs

Allison Van Dusen, 10.09.08, 5:30 PM ET

Shortly after Christopher Parks' father died, as a result of a severe lung disease, Parks' mother sat down to pay a \$20,000 bill for her husband's ventilator use.

Lucky for her, Parks, co-founder and CEO of Change:Healthcare, a technology firm that promotes transparency in health care, and a co-author of *My Healthcare Is Killing Me*, realized that Medicare had wrongly flagged the invoice as a workers' compensation claim and denied it. After several phone calls over the course of months, Parks ultimately got Medicare and secondary insurance to cover every penny.

While [fighting a claim denial or bill](#) that doesn't seem right may not always pay off this much, it's certainly worth the extra effort if you're looking for ways to cut your health care expenses. And these days, who isn't?

In Depth: Your Health Care, For Less

Already, for the first time in a decade, consumers are cutting back on prescriptions, filling fewer in the first and second quarters than they were at the same time in 2007, according to market research firm IMS Health. An August survey of close to 700 consumers by the National Association of Insurance Commissioners also shows that 22% have reduced the number of times they've gone to the doctor's office due to economic concerns.

Unfortunately, things are about to get worse. A new survey of more than 1,300 health plan sponsors by the consulting firm Mercer has found that 59% of companies plan to raise workers' deductibles, copays and out-of-pocket spending limits in 2009. The findings also indicate that the cost of health benefits will likely go up by 5.7% in 2009.

Experts, however, say simply cutting back on your health care isn't smart or effective and that, by delaying treatment, people may actually raise their health insurance costs.

It turns out, though, that you have more options than you may have realized. You've just got to be willing **Related Stories** to [read the fine print](#), ask the right questions and comparison-shop.

"What it boils down to is don't be intimidated," says Parks. "No one cares about your wallet as a patient more than you. Don't blindly consume and use services without understanding how much it costs."

[How To Save Money On Health Care](#)

Parks started the firm in 2006, following the deaths of his parents within a year of each other. While dealing with their medical bills, he questioned why there weren't more tools available for tracking health care expenses. As a result, at [changehealthcare.com](#), registered users can free-of-charge organize their bills and insurance reimbursement paperwork as well as compare costs among physicians, hospitals and pharmacies. The site shows, for instance, that filling a prescription can widely differ pharmacy to pharmacy and even store to store within a chain, making it a wise idea to [shop around](#).

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Once you've verified that a bill is valid, if you still can't afford it, talk to someone in the billing department of your doctor's office or hospital, Pradeep Goel, CEO of MyHealthFunds, a firm that helps employers and employees get the most out of health savings accounts. You may be able to [negotiate](#) a preferred rate or at least set up a payment schedule that will save your provider the trouble of turning to a collection agency.

Another avenue that may pay off, Goel says, is participation in an [employer-sponsored wellness program](#). A new, national survey

of more than 1,900 firms by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Health Research & Educational Trust shows that 53% of small firms (those with three to 199 workers) and 88% of large firms (200 or more workers) offer at least one wellness program, including weight-loss programs, gym membership discounts or on-site facilities, smoking cessation support and personal health coaching. A few even offer employee incentives, such as gift cards, travel, merchandise, cash, smaller premiums or lower deductibles that could boost your budget.

Are you looking for ways to cut back? How are you doing so? Weigh in. Post your thoughts in the Reader Comments section below.

While you're being proactive, keep a [personal health record](#), whether online or simply in a binder. Not only will you be able to track any conditions you might have, but you'll also be able to tell a new doctor when you last had a specific vaccination or screening and potentially avoid costly duplication, says Debbie Kolb-Collier, a senior principal at the Noblis Center for Health Innovation, a nonprofit advisory group for health providers.

And, of course, don't underestimate the importance of keeping up [healthy habits](#).

"It may sound simplistic," Kolb-Collier says, "but to the degree that people exercise, stop smoking, eat right, wash their hands frequently and get adequate sleep--those things in the long run will help them control their health care costs better than anything you could prescribe."

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