

Negotiating Medical Costs



It is human nature to want the most value for your money. The good news is that there are ways to stretch your dollar where health care is concerned. Whether you are uninsured or trying to control your out-of-pocket costs from insurance, using these negotiation and comparison tips can help manage expenses.

Use in-network providers whenever possible

Utilizing in-network facilities, providers, pharmacies, or labs will help lower costs. You can find in-network providers by searching your health plan's online member portal or calling the plan's customer service number. Once you have a list, it is a good idea to double-check that the provider you chose is still in-network when you call to make an appointment. Be sure to ask whether your providers are contracted with your insurance plan, not just if they accept it. This is important because providers can accept an insurance company's payment even if they are out-of-network. You will get the best rate and pay less if you ensure the provider is contracted with your plan.

Use online comparison

There are many tools to help consumers find out the retail cost of procedures like *hospitalcostcompare.com* or *healthcarebluebook.com*. Many insurers also offer similar comparison tools to their plan members online to help you shop around for the lowest cost.



Shop around for non-emergency care

If your provider has prescribed a healthcare service, ask the billing clerk for the procedure code as well as an estimate of the cost. Your health plan may be able to provide a local facility with the least amount of out-of-pocket expense to you, or you can contact the local facility yourself to ask about cost, and use that information to make the best financial decision. For instance, there may be an in-network facility offering the procedure or testing your provider prescribed that is both convenient and more affordable than the one you were originally considering.



Use peer pressure to your advantage

If you have already received a discount or financial assistance from one provider, be sure to mention it to your other providers to see if they will match or offer similar assistance.

Inquire about a payment plan

Even if the provider won't offer a discount or write-off, there may be an option for an interest-free monthly payment plan that won't break your budget. Utilizing this strategy does leave you with the option to renegotiate down the road, and prevent the bill from going to collections, which will add on additional fees. If you have demonstrated good faith by making timely payments on your bill, the provider may be willing to forgive the remainder of the bill if you hit a hard time.

Ask for discounts

Up-front payments: Sometimes facilities or providers will offer you a discount if you pay at the time of service or within the first billing cycle before the bill is due.

Pay cash and save: If you have a high balance, try offering to pay half of the amount in cash as payment in full. Billing departments are often eager to collect something and get the charges off their books and you'll ultimately save on your bill using this method.

Lower drug prices: Remember, if you can't afford your medicine, ask the pharmacist if there is a discount or coupon program that might apply.

Don't forget to inquire about financial assistance options

Non-profit hospitals are required to have financial assistance programs in place, but facilities don't always tell you when you are actually eligible for this aid. Ask whether the provider has a financial assistance program, or you could miss out on some cost savings. Facility discounts are typically based on your income and assets and can range from 10% off the charges to a full write-off of 100%. Don't assume that income or assets (such as home ownership) exclude you from qualifying for financial assistance. Someone who earns \$100,000 annually but has \$25,000 in medical costs could qualify for assistance even if it doesn't initially look like they would be eligible.

