

## Health Insurance Navigator

with Lisa Zamosky

The Affordable Care Act is bringing sweeping changes to American health care. Lisa Zamosky is here to help you navigate the health care maze and understand how these changes affect you.

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### Three Health Care Mistakes That Can Cost You Money

When it comes to health care, we're all paying more for less. Higher deductibles and fewer limits to out-of-pocket maximum spending limits seem to be trends that just won't quit.

In fact, 10 million people were enrolled in a high-deductible health plan at the beginning of last year, up from 8 million in January 2009, and 6.1 million in January 2008, according to a 2010 survey conducted by American's Health Insurance Plans, an industry trade group.

This week, the Health Insurance Navigator talked with Jane Cooper, President and CEO of Patient Care, a health care advocacy organization, about the cost of medical care. She highlights three mistakes that commonly cost health care consumers more money than necessary.

#### Mistake #1: Ignoring Location

Need an outpatient procedure? You may want to avoid the hospital on account of costs. "In a traditional hospital setting, it will be more expensive for the same procedure than if done in an outpatient center because the hospital has to build in overhead costs," Cooper says.

Be on particularly high alert when it comes to services such as diagnostic imaging (X-rays, ultrasound and pet scans), lab work, and outpatient surgeries, which can be done in many different types of care settings.

**Take action:** Many doctors are now on staff with hospitals and you may not be aware that you've been referred to a hospital-owned facility for an X-ray. Ask your doctor or nurse how your outpatient procedure is going to be billed. If the hospital is doing the billing, ask if there is another, less expensive outpatient location where your care can be delivered.

## Mistake #2: Not Knowing What's Preventive Care

As a result of the health reform law, new health plans must offer free preventive care, including common screenings, such as colonoscopies and mammograms.

What people often don't consider, Cooper says, is that if something is discovered during one of those screenings — say a lump that needs further evaluation — it turns into a diagnostic procedure. "Then the care is subject to deductible and co-insurance," Cooper says.

**Take action:** Before any procedures are performed, ask your provider if they fall under the umbrella of preventive care and whether and how much you'll be charged. Of course, you should not skip procedures that you need to get, but you may want to understand, ahead of time, the costs involved.

## Mistake #3: Not Comparing Prices or Quality

Prices and the quality of care vary among health care providers. Ask about costs and comparison shop to avoid spending more than you have to, assuming that the quality of care is comparable.

**Take action:** If you get your insurance at work, ask your Human Resources department if the company offers health advocacy services. **Many large employers work with companies like Patient Care and Health Advocate to help employees navigate the health care system, including finding the best doctor or hospital for an upcoming procedure.**

If you're on your own, question how much the procedure will cost and ask for the CPT code (common procedural terminology) so you can compare prices for the exact procedure you need.

If you have insurance but haven't met your deductible, ask what the negotiated insurance rate is for the procedure and offer to pay that rate (remember paying upfront with cash always helps lower the price).

You can also check the government's hospital compare web site, which has data on Medicare reimbursement and a host of quality measures for hospitals in your area. You should expect to pay about 25% more than the price listed.

*Got a health insurance question? Post it below. I'll respond in this blog each Thursday to as many of your questions as I can.*

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### SOURCES:

AHIP Center for Policy and Research.  
Jane Cooper, President and CEO, Patient Care.