



# *Rising* Health Care Costs:



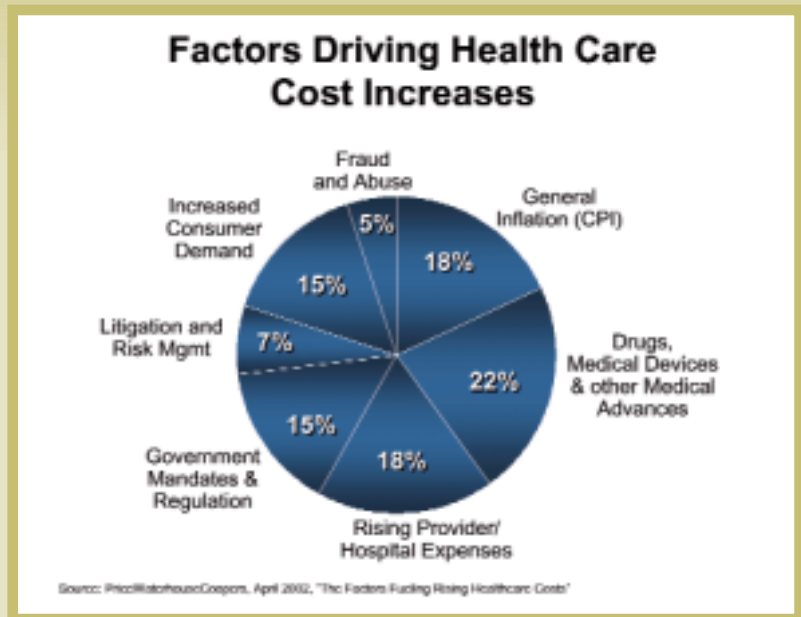
How can we all help  
hold down costs  
and get the most  
from our health care  
dollars?



**Blue Cross and Blue Shield  
of New Mexico**

## Why are Health Care Costs rising?

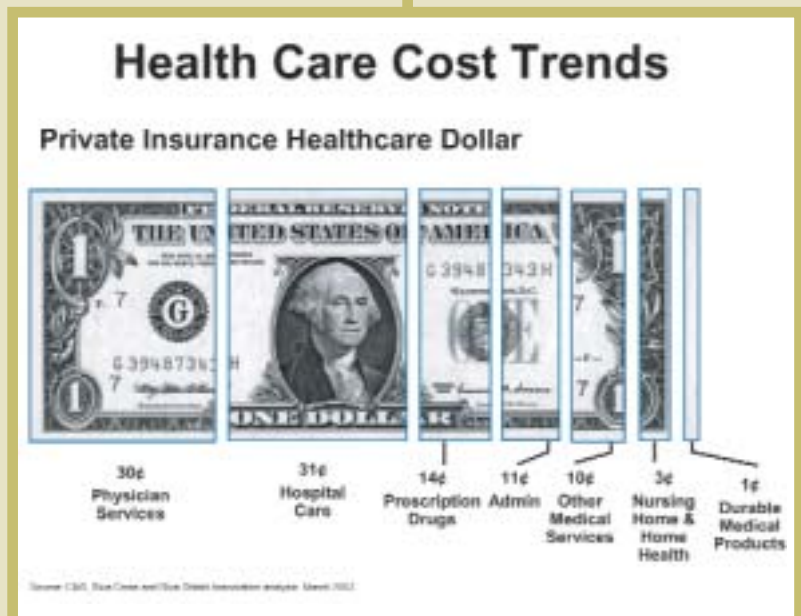
Rising health care costs is a frequent news topic. If you buy health insurance, as an employer or as an individual, you know this first-hand, because when the cost of medical care goes up, so does the cost of health insurance. Why is this happening? This chart shows the major factors driving rising health care costs. For more information, go to [www.bcbsnm.com](http://www.bcbsnm.com), for a brochure on the major drivers of higher health care costs in New Mexico and what BCBSNM is doing to help counter rising costs. Select “Health and Wellness,” then select “Health Care Costs Brochure.”



## Who pays? And for what?

When health insurance pays for medical care, it's easy to think that “someone else” is paying for it. The total cost of health care – how much it really costs – is often unclear when we pay only a small portion. As New Mexicans use more and more medical services, we all pay for it in higher insurance premium costs. And we all pay for unhealthy lifestyle choices.

Whether you buy your own health insurance or are covered through a group plan, you play a vital role in helping to hold down health care costs.



**Following are some suggestions on how we all can help lower health care costs without lowering the quality of health care. The more we all do to get the best value from health care, the more we can help to make health care coverage available to more Americans.**

# Reducing Costs With Healthy Choices

## Take care of yourself.

The single most effective way we can reduce health care costs is through healthy lifestyles that include regular exercise and a balanced diet.

- Get regular checkups and physical exams, including dental.
- Get the recommended immunizations and health screening tests. See the Preventive Health Guidelines for children and adults on our Web site at [www.bcbsnm.com](http://www.bcbsnm.com). Click on “Health and Wellness” and then “Preventive Health Care.”
- Ask your physician to recommend a medical guide for recognizing early symptoms and considering remedies for routine illness.
- Learn the early warning signs of potential health problems and consult a physician when needed. If you have a persistent problem, get it taken care of as soon as possible.

## Take an active role in your care.

Learn as much as you can about your medical needs and take an active role in health care decision-making. You have the right to be involved in your care and treatment.

- Develop a good relationship with your doctor. Coordinating your care through a doctor who understands your medical needs and your expectations can result in a more effective treatment plan.
- When you go to the doctor, be prepared. Write down issues you want to discuss and questions you want to ask. Take notes so you can remember the details later.
- Specialists have in-depth training and experience in particular areas of medicine, but specialty care is usually more expensive. If you need to see a specialist, be prepared so you can get the most out of specialty care:
  - Understand what your primary doctor wants the specialist to do.
  - Be sure to have a referral before seeing a specialist if your health plan requires one.
  - Bring x-rays or test results with you when you visit the specialist.
  - Keep your primary doctor updated and involved.

# Reducing Costs Through the Most Efficient Use of Health Care

## Use the emergency room only for emergencies.

More than half of all ER visits are for minor, nonemergency problems. These visits can be two to three times more expensive than a visit to the doctor's office or an urgent care center. Emergency services are invaluable in trauma or life-threatening situations, but they are costly and inefficient for routine care.

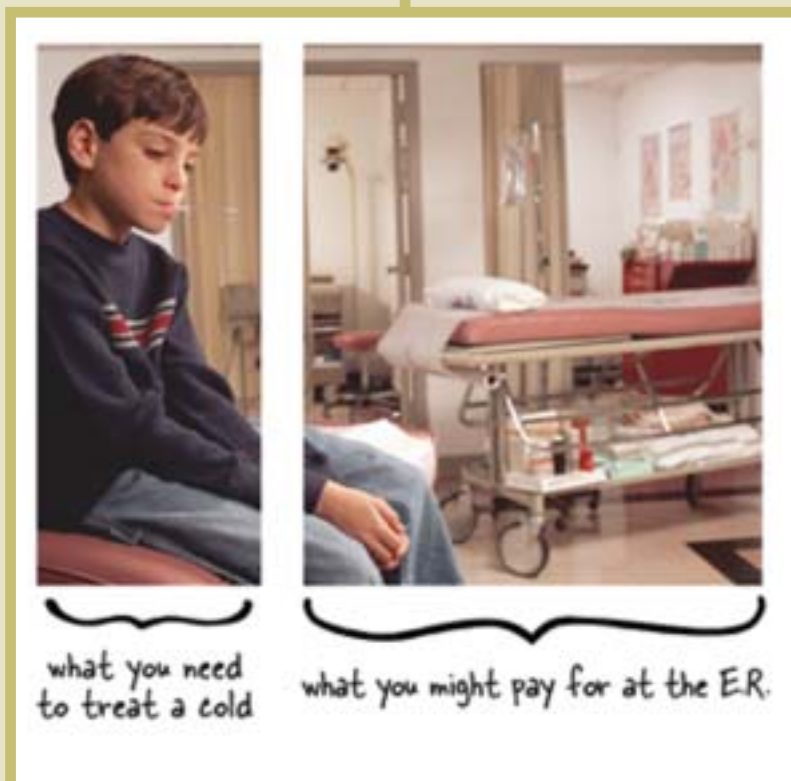
If you think you need medical care but it's not an emergency, call your doctor for directions on receiving the appropriate care at the appropriate time.

## Avoid unnecessary medical tests.

Sometimes tests are ordered simply as standard procedure. Before consenting to a test, ask:

- What is this for? How will it help me get better?
- How much will it cost?
- Are there any alternatives that are less risky or less costly that will provide equivalent results?

Don't repeat medical tests needlessly. If you change doctors, have your current records forwarded to your new doctor.



## Reduce your doctor bills.

If you have minor medical problems, consider first calling your doctor's office for advice rather than scheduling a visit. When we go to the doctor for a cold, it costs an average of \$200, including the doctor's fee, lab work, x-rays, and prescriptions. Yet there is usually little a doctor can do to speed your recovery from a cold. You'll probably be told to take over-the-counter medications and get plenty of rest and fluids.

## Lower your hospital costs.

- Before you're admitted to the hospital, read your benefit booklet to understand exactly what is and isn't covered by your policy.
- Watch for duplicate billings, incorrect admission or check-out dates, and the billing of supplies, medications, and tests that you didn't receive. If any charges are labeled "miscellaneous," ask for an explanation.
- Ask your doctor about alternatives to hospitalization that will provide the same results, such as outpatient services or same-day surgery, other treatments, or changes in diet and exercise that might help your condition.

# Reduce your prescription medication bills.

When your doctor prescribes a medication, consider the following tips to help you save money and ensure that you receive the safest and most effective drug treatment:

- Ask your doctor if an alternative diet or exercise regimen or less expensive over-the-counter medication could provide the same results.
- If your doctor writes a prescription for a brand-name drug, ask if there is a generic substitute. Generic drugs are safe and most are as effective as their brand-name equivalents, and they generally cost considerably less. (If you have prescription drug coverage through BCBSNM, ask your doctor if the drug is on the BCBSNM Drug List.)
- Avoid overuse of antibiotics. The American Academy of Family Physicians estimates that Americans take 50 million unnecessary prescriptions for antibiotics each year, which contributes to bacterial resistance (“super bugs”) and side effects.

Antibiotics do not help viral infections, yet patients often demand antibiotics for treatment. Colds, bronchitis, sore throats, flu, and sinusitis are usually caused by viruses. For example, only a small percentage of sore throats are caused by strep and require an antibiotic.



Our Web site, [www.bcbsnm.com](http://www.bcbsnm.com), provides direct links to respected health care sites that provide valuable information for making good decisions about health care and healthy lifestyle choices. BCBSNM members can also create a personal health profile and complete an on-line health risk assessment.



# Reducing Costs by Understanding Your Health Plan

## Know your health plan benefits.

- Read your benefit booklet and understand what's covered by your health insurance policy. Know if and when you need a referral or preapproval for services. For BCBSNM members, the summaries of benefits for many plans are on our Web site ([www.bcbsnm.com](http://www.bcbsnm.com)), or call Customer Service at the phone number on the back of your ID card.
- For maximum cost savings, use in-network providers for your medical care. Choose your doctors or hospital from the health plan's provider directory (for BCBSNM members, also available on-line at [www.bcbsnm.com](http://www.bcbsnm.com)).
- If you have a medical condition that requires extensive medical treatment, find out if you qualify for case management services. For BCBSNM members, contact our Health Services department: 1.800.325.8334.
- Before encouraging the state legislature to pass insurance mandates, consider what level of care should be mandated by the state and whether you can afford it. When insurance companies are required to cover additional treatments and services, costs go up for everyone.

We hope this information is helpful. Find more information on health care costs at our Web site, [www.bcbsnm.com](http://www.bcbsnm.com), including an eight-page brochure on the major drivers of higher health care costs in New Mexico, what BCBSNM is doing to help counter rising costs, and what everyone can do to also help slow the rise in health care costs (select "Health & Wellness"; then select "Health Care Costs Brochure").

Our corporate mission is "To provide high-quality, cost-effective health care plans to as many people as possible in all the markets we serve." Doing all we can to help slow the increases in health care costs is part of that mission.

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