

Patients who choose doctors with low office visit prices save hundreds of dollars per year

5 December 2016

Patients who choose primary care doctors with low office visit prices can rack up considerable savings on overall health care costs, according to new research from Harvard Medical School.

The report, published Dec. 5 in the December issue of the journal *Health Affairs*, suggests that office visit costs may be a reliable indicator of what a patient will pay for a wide range of services and procedures.

The analysis shows that a relatively small difference in office visit price—\$26—translated into hundreds of dollars in savings over the course of a year. The study found that when [patients](#) received care from [primary care](#) doctors with lower-than-average office visit prices, they spent, on average, \$690 less per year, compared with patients who saw higher-priced physicians.

The savings, the researchers note, were not driven by fewer services or less care. Indeed, there was no significant difference in the kind and amount of services received by the two groups of patients. Rather, patients whose physicians charged lower prices for office visits also paid less for almost every other outpatient service they received.

In the past decade, patients have had to pay more for health care, due to higher deductibles. Many states and private insurers now offer price transparency tools in the hope that access to such information could help people make better-informed decisions on how much they will pay per visit or for a given procedure.

Would picking a provider based on low-priced office visits translate into overall savings including procedures and other follow-up care? The study suggests so.

"Because of the tremendous growth in high-deductible health plans, Americans are being forced to think about prices when they choose where to get care," said study lead author Ateev Mehrotra, associate professor of [health care](#) policy at Harvard Medical School and a hospitalist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. "Our data suggest that looking at the price of your doctor's office visit is a good place to start. Choosing a lower-priced primary care doctor could save someone a lot of money."

Using the 2010 Ingenix insurance database, which contains data from 27 national employers, the researchers grouped primary care doctors into high, average and low price tiers based on the cost of an office visit. From there, they examined the spending of those doctors' patients, looking at how many services such as drugs and emergency care visits patients used and how much the services cost.

Provided by Harvard Medical School

APA citation: Patients who choose doctors with low office visit prices save hundreds of dollars per year (2016, December 5) retrieved 29 April 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-12-patients-doctors-office-prices-hundreds.html>

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