# Talking About the Cost of Care With Your Patient

The cost of health care is quickly becoming an important issue for patients. Are you ready for the conversation?

Patients and family members are becoming more sensitive to the cost of care as they bear a greater share of health care costs. Out-of-pocket costs are a worry for most patients and a substantial financial burden for a growing number with a variety of types of insurance plans. Controlling the cost of care is now part of a national dialogue that extends to conversations in the exam room and at the hospital bed.

 **Patients are considering costs now, sometimes in ways that may be undermining their care.**

While most patients may not be expressing their concerns about cost with you, some patients are already making choices based on their concerns over out-of-pocket costs. These include:

• Not scheduling or attending follow-up return visits.

• Not filling or taking full dosing of their prescription medication.

• Not getting needed tests and treatments, including preventive care.

Without discussion and guidance, many of these decisions are uninformed and can lead to poorer outcomes and, ultimately, higher costs.

***What patients don’t know about cost can hurt them—***especially because there are often available options that maintain quality but have lower costs. Talking about costs with patients may feel too difficult given the time constraints you face, but there are easy ways to have these discussions. The ability to pay for care may be an important part of the decision-making process.

*You can help control your patients’ costs without compromising their care. You can help even without knowing the exact cost of specific tests or treatments.*

While many services are critical to care, others are not. Focusing on essential services and avoiding redundancy can lower co-payments for patients and can ensure compliance, especially for those patients who have high deductibles or are uninsured. For example:

***Diagnostic testing*.** If a CAT scan and an MRI can provide the same insight into a condition that is being diagnosed, being aware of the differences in cost can help you decide between options that provide similar benefits with similar risk. While for some patients the co-pay is the same, for those covering a high deductible, the difference could be profound. Equally important is reducing the number of tests needed; if a test is unlikely to change the treatment plan, do not order the test and, if your patients request it, explain why the test will likely not help them.

***Medications and Therapies*.** Many medications have generic equivalents that reduce out-of-pocket costs for patients. Other cost-savings can be found by recommending pharmacies that offer discounts for 90-day refills, or that offer special pricing for commonly used medications. Some medications within the same class range dramatically in price. Reassure your patients that generic medications are the same as brand-name medications and that you will prescribe the name brand if the generic medication is unsuccessful.

***Hospitals and Surgery Centers*.** If you are affiliated with more than one hospital or surgical center, they likely range in cost as well. If the quality of these centers is equivalent, then letting patients know that these facilities might differ in cost can help patients find the lower-cost option. Also consider offering links to materials such as the Healthcare Blue Book (www.healthcarebluebook.com), FAIR Health (www.FAIRhealth.org), Pricing Healthcare (www.pricinghealthcare.com), and Clear Health Costs (www.clearhealthcosts.com). If surgery is an option, check out state or local reports that compare hospital quality, such as the ones provided by the Leapfrog Group (<http://www.leapfroggroup.org/>).

# Let Patients Know that Costs Should be Part of the Conversation

Patients are often reluctant to bring up costs because they worry their physician will compromise on the quality of their care or think less of them.

## Assure

* **Assure your patients** that you will always provide the best care possible while helping them think about and plan for costs and—when possible—find the most cost-effective options for their care.

## Ask Patients

* If the cost of their care is a concern and should be a factor when making decisions about a test or treatment.
* If they have ever failed to get care you recommended because of cost concerns.

## Educate Your Patients

* Discuss options that are available and have equivalent benefits and harms. Costs may be a patient preference that can be included when discussing trade-offs.
* Help patients understand what treatments and tests they definitely should NOT avoid to reduce their out-of-pocket costs.
* Make a billing expert from your staff available to patients who want to identify their expected out-of-pocket costs during and after office visits; this step can save you time and help patients feel more confident in their decisions. Help them understand what they personally can do to minimize costs, such as using generic medications and exploring price options for non-urgent care.
* Identify lower-priority care so patients can decide whether or not to use those services.

## Educate Yourself

* **Review local and national resources, such as** the Healthcare Blue Book ([www.healthcarebluebook.com](http://www.healthcarebluebook.com)), FAIR Health ([www.FAIRHealthConsumer.org](http://www.FAIRHealthConsumer.org)), Pricing Healthcare ([www.pricinghealthcare.com](http://www.pricinghealthcare.com)), and Clear Health Costs (www.clearhealthcosts.com). If your patients need surgery, lab tests, or treatment from specialists, check out state or local reports that compare hospital quality, such as **[link to public reporting website]** to educate yourself on cost differences in your community.
* Learn about and refer patients, where appropriate, to programs in the community that help patients with drug costs.

## Problem-Solve

* **Explain your reasons** for recommending certain treatments or tests as pros and cons of the different options.

**About the Author**

American Institutes for Research (AIR) provides technical assistance for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s *Aligning Forces for Quality* initiative. AIR is working with Aligning Forces communities to support consumer engagement efforts to promote high-quality health care at a low cost.

* **Help patients make effective trade-off decisions** by considering the benefits and harms of options in relation to cost and quality.
* **Refer patients to a social worker or other resources that can offer support if the patient reports other financial challenges.**