

# Benefits Insights

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## Benefits Trends

According to recent research, most companies are looking to lower their rising health care costs and improve their employees' overall health. When HR professionals look toward the future, they are evaluating strategies to help manage both short- and long-term costs. In order to evaluate these costs, it is important that employers understand what their employees think about their benefits.

Health care costs tend to fluctuate on an annual basis—sometimes substantially and sometimes minimally. Regardless, these costs are still burdensome to most employers, leading companies to adopt a variety of strategies to try and mitigate and manage health care expenses.

### 2017 Health Care Cost Trends

2017 cost trends are now available from various research organizations. The following health insurance cost trends are based on recent employer surveys:

- Aon Hewitt reported net health care costs for 2016 increased 4.2 percent, while net costs for 2017 increased 4.5 percent.
- In its 2017 Employer Health Benefits Survey, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Health Research & Educational Trust reports that average annual premiums rose 3 percent for family coverage and 4 percent for individual coverage in 2017.
- PriceWaterhouseCoopers stated that the medical cost trend decreased from 6.2 percent in 2016 to 6.0 percent in 2017, according to the survey Behind the Numbers: Medical Cost Trends for 2018. This rate is expected to slightly increase to 6.5 percent in 2018.
- The Segal Group, Inc.'s 2018 Health Plan Cost Trend Survey predicts that health plan costs will be less than 0.5 percent higher in 2018 than in 2017. In

contrast, the prescription drug coverage increase is still projected to be in the double digits for active employees and retirees under age 65.

### Cost-shifting Initiatives

In an effort to reduce benefit costs, employers can implement some of the following cost-containment strategies:

- Consider offering financial incentives to your employees in the form of an employer-sponsored wellness program. According to Corporate Wellness Magazine, every \$1 invested in employee wellness programs yields roughly \$4 in savings through reduced sick days, higher productivity and decreased overall health costs. For the employees who choose to participate in the program, their employers may offer them various perks such as discounted insurance premiums, smoking cessation programs, and/or discounted health club memberships. By allowing your employees to lead by example, you are indirectly promoting healthy behavior without directly penalizing unhealthy habits that may lead to higher costs.
- Encourage employees to use their preventive care benefits, including getting their appropriate screenings and vaccinations. Emphasize that these services are available at no cost to employees.
- Consider offering an on-site health center staffed with health coaches who can provide advice on personal health needs—this can help make seeking care more cost-effective and convenient.

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- Offer voluntary benefits options that meet personal and family needs, such as homeowners, automobile and group life insurance. Also, consider offering discounts on vision and dental care, massage therapy, chiropractic care, health club memberships and weight-control programs.
- Provide online tools for employees, including health education and other resources, to help them become smarter health care consumers.
- Consider offering an HDHP with a health savings account or health reimbursement arrangement to promote consumerism and reduce costs.
- Align your business goals with your employee health goals and devise a way for individuals or departments to maintain healthy lifestyles, start exercising and/or stop engaging in unhealthy habits. Consider making it fun, engaging and supportive—such as having contests and other group events where employees are encouraged to help each other make good choices.
- Use marketing techniques that will motivate employees to take action. Consider posters in the break room, occasional emails and wellness-related articles on your company intranet if you have one.
- Suggest that employees use the generic form of their prescriptions (if available) to save money.
- Join or create a tiered or high-performance network, which encourages patients to visit more cost-effective providers either through network restrictions or tiered copay and coinsurance amounts.
- Many businesses are choosing to re-evaluate their overall benefits strategy in light of the Affordable Care Act and other developments.

Take time this year to ensure that is making the right choices in plan design and benefits offerings. Contact your E.B. Cohen representative for help implementing any of these strategies, which can help reduce costs and promote a healthier workforce.