Health Insurance Alternatives and Supplements To Help You Control Your Budget

December 10, 2019 - There are just five more days in open enrollment for health insurance and if you are like many Americans, you're probably a little frustrated - or worried - about your premium costs. Ever since the implementation of Obamacare, premiums and deductibles have both gone through the roof for many, making the thought of actually utilizing your insurance daunting even in the case of an emergency. That's why consumers may want to look at using telemedicine as an alternative, or supplement to their health plan, as a means to control ever spiraling medical costs.

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If you have never used a telemedicine service before, just the thought of it may seem odd. You may think of it like this. Instead of seeing a doctor you know, you schedule a phone conversation with someone that you may only speak with once to address whatever health issue you are currently having. With a little luck, you'll get a diagnosis or a prescription and go along you way. That's not the type of relationship that most of us are used to with our doctors; unless of course you are visiting an emergency room.

While the description above is accurate for some telemedicine services, not all of these services are created alike. And they don't all cost the same thing or provide the same services either.

If you are just looking for a basic service, the one that is probably the best known is Teladoc. For $3 per month and $45 per consultation, you can talk with a doctor about your issue or get many prescriptions refilled. The service is on-demand. In most cases, once you setup your account and ask for a consultation, you'll hear from a doctor in just a few minutes. But there are caveats to the services that they can provide.

Teladoc makes it very clear that they aren't trying to replace your regular physician. They limit patients to two prescription refills a year (limited to a 30 day supply), and they can't prescribe certain medicines such as opioids or psychotropic drugs. They are really there to deal with issues when you are in a pinch and can't make it to a doctor's office. But they do have relationships with a lot of insurance companies that can eliminate their subscription fee altogether and which may reduce the cost of consultations.

On the other end of the spectrum are services like those offered by SteadyMD. This service is designed to set you up with a doctor who will become your primary care physician. For $99 a month, you can talk to your doctor as often as you like. And because they are primary care physicians, they don't have some of the limitations on the services they provide that Teladoc and others in their category do.

When reviewing telemedicine services, it's important to remember that they can't replace traditional health insurance for many things. For instance they don't cover hospitalization or the cost of prescriptions. But for those who can't afford medical insurance, they can provide a valuable safety net that will make talking to a doctor affordable.

They may also allow some consumers to lower the overall cost of their insurance annually. If you are looking at medical insurance plans and you know that you're going to have to see doctors regularly, it may be less expensive to you to choose the least expensive insurance plan with a higher cost for doctors visits and then supplement it with a telemedicine service that allows you to speak with a doctor whenever you want to, than to pay for a more expensive plan with lower per-visit costs. Of course you need to factor in other things when doing that review, such as the costs for prescriptions or hospitalizations if you think those will be issues.

Online Medical Care has published a good overview of 10 of telemedicine services and it may surprise you to see what is available.
by Jim Malmberg
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