



Why are employees going to the ER more often than ever before, after we raised the copay?

Nationwide the number of emergency room visits has been rising. People who have health insurance increased their ER visits by 24 percent between 1996 and 2001; visits by the uninsured went up only 10 percent in the same time period. Looking at ER visits for “inappropriate care” is common practice. The goal was to discourage employees from using the hospital ER for sore throats and other illness that could wait until the morning.

Non-emergency care in the ER is not the problem . . .

The costly problem in ER use is preventable emergencies. Only by digging deeper into the diagnosis patterns can we find ways to reduce ER visits.

Is this appropriate ER use?

It is late at night. The employee’s 12-year-old daughter suddenly has trouble breathing. He frantically searches for her inhaler only to realize that it got left behind at his ex-wife’s house, an hour’s drive away.

It is certainly an emergency, but it might have been prevented with better disease management. Patient education can take many forms - having a nurse visit the child and parents at home is a proven method to reduce asthma emergencies. A child will use medication more consistently if he or she is accountable to a medical professional and understands the consequences of not using the medication. The use of a special asthma health education video game has also been shown to reduce ER visits by 80 percent.

On a Saturday afternoon, the employee’s spouse takes their son to his out-of-town soccer game. During the game, he twists his ankle but continues playing. A few hours later, his ankle is swollen, purplish, and tender to the touch. The employee’s spouse, not having any ice or pain killers handy, takes him to the local hospital.

Coaches may not be trained to discern a minor injury from a more serious one. Even if first aid is available, it may not be used effectively. An employer whose group is primarily young families could help to prevent this kind of ER visit, by supporting coaches (especially volunteer coaches) with injury prevention training and materials.

There are many ways to reduce ER use, once you know WHY employees are going there

Health Economy can give you and your self-funded clients a brand new tool to master their costs. Now is the prime time for January renewal decisions. Help your clients make better decisions for 2004.