

Medicare To Cover Tobacco Treatment Counseling Services for Seniors

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Beginning this spring, Seniors nationwide who want to quit smoking could be the first to benefit from a free national counseling initiative. Medicare has decided to add smoking cessation counseling as a covered benefit for those beneficiaries who currently suffer from tobacco caused diseases- including heart disease, lung cancer, stroke, emphysema, weak bones, blood clots and cataracts. In addition, seniors who take any drugs whose effectiveness is compromised by the use of tobacco, such as insulin and antidepressants, will qualify for the benefit. Under the current decision, physicians, nurses and other professionals trained in smoking cessation techniques will be reimbursed for the cost of four counseling sessions. Should a Senior not be able to quit by the end of the four sessions, then Medicare will cover the cost of four additional sessions. It is not clear at this time whether the coverage is for individual or group counseling sessions or how long the sessions must be in order for reimbursement. What is known is that medications prescribed for the treatment of nicotine addiction, such as the nicotine inhaler, nasal spray, nortiptoline and bupropion, will not be covered until the Medicare prescription plan kicks in 2006. The benefit, pending public comment, is slated to be available in April of 2005.

The issue of reimbursement for tobacco dependence treatment has always been a very complex one. Many in the field can attest to the

frustration of obtaining information on whether a client's insurance will cover this service as a benefit. **The Professional Assisted Cessation Therapy organization (PACT)** offers some clarity in the *Reimbursement for Smoking Cessation Therapy Guide* which lists treatment methods that should be covered, state-by-state. As of the last edition of the guide, only 36 states offered Medicaid coverage of smoking cessation therapy, 10 of these covering counseling. On a positive note, between 1998 and 2001, there was a near doubling of Medicaid coverage of all FDA pharmacotherapy used to treat tobacco dependence. We can only hope that the latest Medicare news will help drive the number of states which mandate smoking cessation coverage (currently only four states) or likewise, increase the number of managed care organizations (MCOs) which cover face-to-face counseling, currently the least likely intervention to be covered.

For those in New Jersey seeking a bit of clarity on the status of reimbursement in this state, below is a guide to assist you.

Individual Health Plans and Small Employers Health Plans

Currently, the Department of Banking and Insurance (DOBI) has reported that there may be "nicotine dependence treatment coverage" for employees with individual insurance plans (self-employed) and people working in companies with less than 50 employees. However,

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in practice when contacting insurance companies, this information is difficult to ascertain. It is unclear how well educated insurance company personnel are about coverage issues. When asked about smoking cessation coverage, insurance company representatives will frequently say it's not a covered benefit. However, when asked about "Nicotine Dependence Treatment" – the language of the DOBI under "preventative care benefits" (the medical part of the insurance, not the mental health part), many insurance companies have acknowledged that this is a covered service and eventually paid for the treatment. The DOBI language states: "The Carrier also covers charges for immunizations and vaccines, well baby care, pap smears, mammography,... and Nicotine Dependence Treatment." There are usually caps on the amount covered/year and some insurance companies in NJ have reported they would pay for NRT in addition to counseling. In summary, it is very important when calling insurance companies to be very specific and to explore what services are covered under the preventative care benefits.

Large Group Employers

People who work for a company with more than 50 employees fall into this category. At this time, NJ law (as reported by the DOBI) does not mandate coverage for nicotine dependence treatment. There is a law that people with insurance paid for by a large group are entitled to one annual consultation or "Wellness visit" with a health care provider. Among other things covered during this consultation, "smoking control" may be addressed. At this time, it is unclear if specific insurance companies would actually pay for a smoking cessation counseling focused session as part of this annual consultation. Additionally, specific insurance plans, "depending on their particular contract," may only consider a physician for this service. Finally, reportedly, this annual consultation may not apply to "self-funded" insurance plans.

In summary, while there are many positive changes on the reimbursement horizon nationally, and some private insurance reimbursement availabilities in NJ for these life saving tobacco treatment services, many insurance companies continue dodging responsibility and many create loopholes to avoid coverage. Part of what needs to happen is for us all to do more to educate Human Resource Managers, and employees to advocate for appropriate coverage. We also need to communicate this to Legislature/Senate people as well. It may be helpful to frame this as a form of discrimination against smokers. In many instances, private insurance companies eventually follow Medicare's example on coverage issues. We must continue with a full course press here, if we are to save more lives in NJ.

If you would like to read more about the Medicare proposal to pay for smoking cessation counseling services, [click here](#).

References: Personal Communication with John Leyman, Chief of Government Affairs, DOBI