

Disability Rights Legal Center



Cancer Legal Resource Center

**Cancer Legal Resource Center**

919 Albany Street • Los Angeles, CA 90015

Toll Free: 866.THE.CLRC (866.843.2572)

Phone: 213.736.1455

TDD: 213.736.8310 Fax: 213.736.1428

Email: [CLRC@LLS.edu](mailto:CLRC@LLS.edu)

Web: [www.CancerLegalResourceCenter.org](http://www.CancerLegalResourceCenter.org)

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## Health Insurance in Mississippi

### Types of Private Health Insurance

#### Group vs. Individual Insurance

*Group insurance* is usually offered through your employer or some form of a trade association (ex. a union, etc.). *Individual insurance* means that you are contracting directly with an insurance company (ex. when you purchase a plan from Blue Cross or Blue Shield, etc.). People who purchase group or individual health insurance plans are called “members” of that insurance company.

#### HMO, PPO, and POS Plans

There are three types of managed care plans. There are HMO, PPO, and POS plans.

*HMO* stands for a health maintenance organization. There are generally two forms: 1) independent physician associations (IPAs), and 2) stand alone facilities. IPAs have physicians that practice in their own offices and sometimes join with other providers to form a medical group.

*PPO* stands for Preferred Provider Organization. A PPO is a group of health care providers who have agreed to provide services to an insurance company’s members at a reduced rate.

*POS* stands for Point of Service Plan. A POS Plan is a cross between an HMO and a PPO. Members of a POS plan decide which type of service they want to use at the point when they are ready to use it.

HMO	PPO	POS
Participating doctors and hospitals. Generally have a primary care physician who coordinates care	Usually many health care provider and hospital choices	Can see providers in- or out-of-network
HMO	PPO	POS
Generally have to select doctors and hospitals from within the participating group	Can select from all participating providers	If selecting within network, generally have a minimal co-pay. If selecting from larger group, member will pay more
Limited choices	More choices in doctors, specialists, overall providers	More choice when needed
Usually less expensive	Usually more expensive	Cost is between that of a PPO and an HMO

## What to consider when choosing a health insurance plan

- 1) Look at the summary of *benefits*. What benefits are included? What benefits are excluded?
- 2) Look at *costs*. How much are the monthly premiums, annual deductibles, and co-payments?
- 3) When are the *enrollment periods*? Do they offer annual open enrollment periods to make changes to your policy?
- 4) How much *flexibility* do they offer? Can you change plans if you need to? How?

Health insurance companies are required to renew an individual's existing health coverage, but there is no cap on the rate increases companies may impose at the time of renewal. This is called guaranteed renewability. Guaranteed renewability is not portable, so you do not have the right to switch to another company or even another product offered by the same company.

## **Ways to Get and Keep Health Insurance**

### Employment-Based Health Insurance

The most common way that people obtain health insurance coverage is through their own employment or a family member's employment. There are certain rights that are guaranteed to people who are insured through their own or a family member's employment. These rights have to do with the continuation of coverage during certain leaves of absence (under the Family and Medical Leave Act) or upon termination of employment (see COBRA, discussed below). Persons with employment-based health insurance are also protected from health insurance discrimination based on their pre-existing conditions under the Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act (see HIPAA, discussed below).

### COBRA

COBRA is a federal law that allows you to continue the same health insurance coverage that you had through your or your family member's employer. It's the same health insurance policy you had when you were employed, so you don't have to worry about changing providers.

COBRA is available to an employee or family member after an employee has terminated their employment or has reduced their work hours to a point that they are no longer eligible to receive coverage from their employer. This termination or reduction in hours is referred to as a "qualifying event." Other qualifying events for COBRA are divorce or death of a spouse (when the person seeking COBRA coverage was insured by a plan provided through the spouse's employment), or a child aging out of a parent's health insurance policy.

Federal law defines the terms of COBRA coverage and its availability as follows:

- COBRA applies to employers with 20 or more employees.
- COBRA coverage generally lasts for 18 months.<sup>1</sup>
- The cost of the monthly premium paid by the employee can be up to 102% of what the employer was paying for the same benefits.
- The person insured is responsible for the full premium for the coverage.
- Who is responsible for notifying the health plan of the qualifying event depends on which qualifying event has occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> COBRA coverage can last up to 29 months if the person insured has a qualifying disability, or up to 36 months if the person became eligible for COBRA coverage because of certain qualifying events or a combination of qualifying events.

- A health plan has 14 days after the plan administrator is notified of the qualifying event to notify the employee of the right to elect COBRA.
- An employee must elect COBRA within 60 days after being notified of their COBRA rights. The employee then has 45 days after electing coverage to pay the initial premium.

If you elect COBRA coverage, you will have to pay the premiums for each month since you became eligible. So, even if you wait until the last day of your eligibility to elect COBRA coverage, you will still have to back-pay the premiums to the date your eligibility began.

### Mississippi State Continuation Coverage

Mississippi has a state version of COBRA which does essentially the same thing as federal COBRA. It lets you keep your health insurance when you experience a “qualifying event.”

State law defines the terms of Mississippi’s state continuation coverage and its availability as follows:

- Mississippi state continuation coverage applies to employers who offer fully insured health benefits.
- Mississippi state continuation coverage generally lasts for 12 months for employees who have been continuously insured under the group policy for 3 consecutive months prior to the date of termination.

For information about state continuation coverage, contact the Mississippi Insurance Department.

### Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act (HIPAA)

HIPAA prohibits health insurance discrimination against individuals based on their pre-existing conditions, when going from a group health insurance plan to another group health insurance plan or from a group plan to a HIPAA guarantee issue plan.

HIPAA also: 1) provides a federal right to an individual health insurance plan (called a guarantee issue plan); 2) reduces the maximum pre-existing condition exclusion period to 12 months; and 3) gives you credit for the time that you had health insurance coverage in the past to eliminate or reduce a pre-existing condition exclusion period.

### *Guarantee Issue Plan*

Normally when you apply for an individual health insurance plan, you are required to go through a process called medical underwriting. During this process, the insurance company looks at your past and current medical condition in order to decide whether or not they want to issue you a health plan. If you currently have, or in the past have had, a serious medical condition, the insurance company will likely decide that it is not worth the risk to them to issue you a health plan, and they will deny you coverage.

A guarantee issue plan, also known as a “federally insured plan” or “HIPAA plan,” is an individual health insurance plan that you have a right to purchase under federal law. A HIPAA plan isn’t a specific plan – it’s just a right to purchase an individual plan.

In Mississippi, HIPAA plans are available through the Mississippi Comprehensive Health Insurance Risk Pool Association (MCHIRA). MCHIRA also offers non-HIPAA plans, so be sure to use words “HIPAA plan” when you apply.

A HIPAA plan is different than COBRA coverage. Under COBRA, you keep the same health insurance you had through your employer. Under HIPAA you are buying new insurance, so you need

to compare all of the available plans and pick the one that is right for you. Compare the premiums, deductibles, and co-payments. Check to make sure your healthcare providers accept any insurance plan you are considering, and check to make sure that your prescription drugs are on the formulary list of drugs covered by the plan.

You must meet the following requirements to be eligible for a HIPAA plan:

- You must exhaust your COBRA coverage, meaning that you use all 12 months of COBRA coverage, and any additional COBRA coverage available to you.
- You cannot have a break in coverage longer than 63 days.
- You must be ineligible for Medicare, Medicaid, or any other form of group coverage.

### *Pre-existing Condition Exclusion Period (PECEP)*

When you are going from one employer's group health plan to another employer's plan, the new plan is required to insure you, but they can impose a PECEP, which means that for a certain period of time, they will not cover any treatment or services related to a pre-existing medical condition. Before HIPAA, a two-year PECEP was the industry standard. HIPAA limited the maximum PECEP that may be imposed to one year.

### *Creditable Coverage*

Creditable coverage is any previous period of health insurance coverage that was not interrupted by a break in coverage of more than 63 days. HIPAA reduces any PECEP by the length of time that you previously had creditable coverage. Example: If you previously had coverage for four months, have not had a break in coverage of more than 63 days, and your new insurance plan has a PECEP of 12 months, then you get a credit for your 4 previous months of coverage, leaving you with only 8 months left on your PECEP. So, if you have 12 months or more of previous health insurance coverage and you never have a break in coverage of more than 63 days, you will never face a PECEP.

Almost all types of health insurance can qualify as creditable coverage. (Medicare, Medicaid, group, individual, COBRA, and HIPAA plans can all qualify.) One exception is student health insurance plans because they are not typically a full policy with catastrophic coverage. If a particular condition was not covered by the policy that you are claiming as creditable coverage, then your new health plan may still subject that condition to a PECEP.

To show that you have creditable coverage, call your insurance company to request a "certificate of creditable coverage," which lists the dates that you have been insured by that company. If you have been insured by multiple companies, you need certificates of creditable coverage from each one.

### Mississippi Major Risk Insurance Plan

A major risk plan is health insurance coverage for Mississippi residents who are unable to obtain coverage in the individual health insurance market due to a pre-existing medical condition. Major risk plans are available through Mississippi Comprehensive Health Insurance Risk Pool Association (MCHIRPA).

Requirements to qualify for coverage from MCHIRPA:

- must be a legal Mississippi resident for at least 6 consecutive months
- must not be eligible for or have other, similar coverage from a private or government health plan including Medicare & Medicaid
- may be eligible if you are transferring from another state's high risk pool

- the 6-month residency requirement does not apply to those transferring from another state but the application must be submitted within 63 days of becoming a Mississippi resident

MCHIRPA will look back 6 months to see if you had medical a condition for which you received a diagnosis, medical advice, or treatment. If so, you will be subject to a 12-month pre-existing condition exclusion period when you first enroll MCHIRPA does not credit prior continuous coverage toward pre-existing condition exclusions. However, if you lost your prior coverage through no fault of your own, you may be able to get credit if you apply for MCHIRPA within 63 days of losing your prior coverage.

## Handling Health Insurance Disputes

If you disagree with a decision that your health insurance provider has made regarding coverage, you have the right to appeal that decision. The appeals process varies depending on what state you live in. In Mississippi, you must appeal through your health plan's internal appeals process. Beyond that, there is no right to an external review mandated by law.

### *Internal review*

This is the health plan's own review of its decision. There are state and federal laws and rules that apply to internal review processes.

### Before you begin an appeal, understand your coverage and applicable laws.

An *employer-sponsored* health plan is one that a person can get through their own employment or through a family member's employment. The employer usually makes a contribution toward the cost of the employee's coverage. An *individually purchased* plan is one that you purchase directly from a health plan. The person purchasing the insurance pays the entire premium. Different laws apply depending on whether your plan is employer-sponsored or individually-purchased.

If your plan is an employer-sponsored plan, you need to know whether it is a *self-insured* plan. A self-insured plan is one in which the employer does not contract with an insurance company to insure their employees. Instead, the employer does their own risk pooling like an insurance company would, and pays directly for their employees' health costs. Since self-insurance does not involve a contract between an insurance company and an employer, it is not subject to state insurance regulations. Federal laws still apply to self-insured plans.

Know *what is covered* and what is not covered by your plan. Also know what *procedures* and *deadlines* are required by your plan. After appealing the decision through your plan, Mississippi law does not require the company to allow for an independent medical review or external appeal.

Contact the Department of Insurance for Mississippi for more information about your right to appeal adverse decisions made by your insurance carrier.

## Resources

### For Assistance With Insurance or Questions About State Health Insurance Continuation Coverage

#### **Mississippi Insurance Department**

501 Northwest St., Suite 1001

Jackson, MS 39201

(800) 562-2957 or (601) 359-3569

<http://www.mid.state.ms.us/> or

<http://www.mid.state.ms.us/consumer/publications/healthinsurance.pdf>

For Questions About COBRA

**U.S. Department of Labor**

Employee Benefits Security Administration

(404) 562-2156 or (866) 275-7922

<http://www.dol.gov/ebsa/>

For Questions About HIPAA

**Mississippi Insurance Department**

(800) 562-2957 or (601) 359-2453

<http://www.mid.state.ms.us/>

For Questions About MCHIRPA

**Mississippi Comprehensive Health Insurance Risk Pool Association**

(601) 899-9967 or (888) 820-9400

[http://www.doi.state.ms.us/htm\\_files/mchirpa.html](http://www.doi.state.ms.us/htm_files/mchirpa.html)

For Assistance for Children

**Mississippi Children's Health Insurance Program**

(877) 543-7669

<http://www.medicaid.ms.gov/Chip.aspx>

Application: <http://www.medicaid.ms.gov/ApplicationForms/ChipApp.pdf>

For Questions About Medicaid

**Medicaid**

Mississippi Department of Human Services

(800) 948-3050

<http://www.medicaid.ms.gov/> or

<http://www.medicaid.ms.gov/EligibilityGuides/AgedDisabledEligibility.pdf>

**Elderly & Disabled Waiver (IHSS)**

<http://www.medicaid.ms.gov/Pamphlets/ElderlyAndDisabledHCBS.pdf>

For Questions About Medicare

**Mississippi Division of Aging and Adult Services**

**Insurance Counseling & Assistance Program**

750 N. State St.

Jackson, MS 39202

(601) 359-4929 or (800) 948-3090

[http://www.mdhs.state.ms.us/aas\\_info.html](http://www.mdhs.state.ms.us/aas_info.html)

**U.S. Department of Health & Human Services**

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS)

(800) 633-4227

<http://www.cms.hhs.gov/>

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