

Keeping your Health Coverage When You Lose Your Job

I lost my job. Can I keep my health insurance?

A federal law called COBRA lets you keep your health insurance even if you:

- Quit your job
- Lose your job
- Have your work hours cut back.

New York State's mini-COBRA law provides more generous protections. Together, the federal and state laws cover most workers.

My wife still has insurance at her job. Should I just join her plan?

Your spouse's employer has to give you a chance to enroll in their plan. Joining a spouse's plan may be cheaper than paying for COBRA coverage.

What will it cost to keep my insurance?

You pay the entire premium for the plan: your share, your employer's share, and a small fee for administration. You keep paying the same co-pays and deductibles. COBRA is usually a better deal than buying insurance on your own.

Can I get help paying the premium?



Yes. Congress has created a short-term program to help people who are laid off pay their COBRA premiums. You only have to pay 35 percent of the total premium. The government pays the other 65 percent. You can get the subsidy for up to 15 months.

The subsidy is only available for premiums, not for other health costs like co-pays or deductibles.

Who qualifies for the subsidy?

You can qualify for a full subsidy if:

- You were laid off between September 1, 2008 and February 28, 2010.
- Your adjusted gross income is less than \$125,000 as an individual or \$250,000 as a family.

People who make more (up to \$145,000 as an individual or \$290,000 as a family) can still take the subsidy but will have to pay part of it back through their income tax returns.

People who make too much to qualify for the subsidy have two choices:

- Take the subsidy and later pay the full subsidy amount back through their income tax returns.
- Pay the full premium.

You do not qualify for a subsidy if:

- You quit your job or lost your insurance because your hours were cut.
- You qualify for any other insurance coverage, like Medicare, or your spouse's insurance through work.

How do I sign up?

Your insurance plan will send you a notice if you qualify for COBRA. You must sign up for COBRA within 60 days. The notice says where to send the premium and how much it costs. Talk to your employer right away if you do not get that notice.

The notice should include information about how to sign up for the subsidy. Talk to your employer if you don't get information about the subsidy.

For more information call the CSS Health Helpline: 212-614-5400

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Are there other programs that help pay COBRA premiums?

Yes. The New York Medicaid program will pay COBRA premiums for low-income people. In New York City, call 1-888-692-6116 to apply for Medicaid.

Moderate-income entertainment industry workers in New York who qualify for COBRA through a collectively bargained plan may also qualify for a state subsidy. For more information call the State Department of Insurance at (518)473-6107.

Can I switch to a cheaper plan?

Yes. Employers that offer a lot of plans at different premiums must let you switch to a cheaper plan during their regular open enrollment period.

People on the subsidy can ask their employer to change them to a cheaper plan, but employers do not have to do so.

How long can I keep my coverage under COBRA?

Everyone can keep this coverage for up to 18 months. Under a new law, most New York employers have to let you keep your COBRA coverage for up to 36 months.

COBRA coverage can also end if you:

- Become eligible for Medicare or get other coverage after your COBRA coverage starts.
- Do not pay the premium on time.

What if my company went bankrupt?

You will not be able to get insurance through COBRA if the company you worked for went out of business or cancelled their health insurance coverage for everyone at the company.

I have to go to the hospital and I do not have insurance. What can I do?

In New York State, most hospitals must provide financial assistance to you if you are:

- Uninsured or your insurance benefits ran out;
- Unable to pay for services;
- Your income is at or below 300 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (\$66,150 for a family of four), and
- You have limited assets.

This financial assistance is provided through discounts on your bills, depending on how much income you make.

Even with financial assistance I will have trouble paying the rest of the bill. What rights do I have if the hospital bills me?

There are rules about how the hospital bills you after you receive your care:

- The hospital has to offer you an installment plan to pay your bill.
- They can only charge you a small interest rate, and your monthly payment cannot be more than 10 percent of your gross monthly income.
- If you fall behind, the hospital cannot force you to sell your home or force your house into foreclosure, and has to warn you in writing before they send your bill to collections.

Some community health centers also charge patients using a sliding scale based on income.

We can help you find a community health center in your neighborhood. Call CSS at 212-614-5400.

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