

THE HELP DESK

Buying your own health insurance

47 million Americans go without health insurance. Here is your guide to buying insurance on the private market.



By Gerri Willis,
CNN personal finance editor

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-- To be clear, we're talking about people here who don't qualify for Medicaid or COBRA. If this is you, you may need to buy insurance in the private marketplace.

There are obvious downsides here. Cost is one. People who don't have health insurance pay about \$2,260 in out of pocket costs per year -- that's twice as much as someone who is covered under an employer's plan according to *Consumer Reports*. And in many states, you can't even get coverage on the private market if you have a pre-existing condition, like diabetes.

But ... the reality is that going without health insurance is dangerous. High medical bills is a main reason why people declare bankruptcy. But you

don't have to get an all-comprehensive policy. You can opt for short-term health care or catastrophic insurance coverage that will kick in when there's an emergency.

How to shop for individual insurance plans

There are basically three ways to go.

First, check out insurance comparison Web sites like eHealthinsurance.com. Use it to get a range of individual health insurance policies and to compare prices and benefit levels.

Next, go to your state insurance department's Web site. Here you may find companies selling individual coverage in your state. And the insurance department may also provide complaint records on individual insurance companies.

Finally, consider using a health care broker who knows your local market. Brokers can help you shop for price. They'll also know what company is more

liable to accept you based on your health conditions. The best part is that you won't pay a dime out of pocket says Amir Mostafie at eHealthinsurance.com. They get a commission paid by the insurance company that you sign up with.

To find an agent in your area, go to the National Association of Health Underwriters at Nahu.org.

Know your eligibility

You don't automatically qualify for Medicaid just because you have a low income. It also depends on your family status - if you have kids etc.

To find out what eligibility requirements of health care programs like S-Chip or programs for the elderly, go to coverageforall.org.