

HEALTH INSURANCE

I'll be guaranteed a private room in the hospital if I have health insurance.

FICTION

Want a bit of peace and quiet if you end up on your back in the hospital? It is true that you have a better chance of getting some privacy if you have health insurance but it is not guaranteed. If a private or semi-private room is available, then it's all yours. If not, you'll be admitted to a public ward and you'll only get moved if a room becomes available during your stay. If you don't have health insurance and want a room on your own, you can request it but you'll be charged €900 a night for semi-private and €1,000 a night for a private room.

There is no point getting health insurance. Going through the public system is free.

FICTION

The public health system isn't going to leave you high and dry and if you need an X-ray or emergency surgery, this won't cost you. However, you will have to pay for your stay in hospital. It costs €80 per night and that is capped at a maximum of 10 nights. So for example, if you are admitted to hospital as a public patient and have to stay for two weeks, you will be looking at a bill of €800 when you check out.

Having health insurance will help me skip the queue.

FACT

The real benefit of having health insurance is that you get to skip the waiting lists that people experience in the public system. Say, for example, you hurt your knee. You can still function and walk around but you've got discomfort and pain on occasion. If you're a public patient, your GP will refer you to a consultant but you could be waiting a year just to see them and longer to get your surgery. A private patient could see a consultant within a week or two and get the surgery within a month or two. You'll have to pay to see the consultant but some of this cost can be claimed back on your health insurance, depending on the policy.

FACT FICTION

Are you burying your head in the sand about health insurance because it's so mind-boggling? Ciara Leahy separates fact from fiction and gives some straight answers

The older you are taking out a health insurance policy, the more expensive the policy becomes.

FACT

As if getting older isn't bad enough, now your health insurance is going to cost more. On 1 May, legislation came into effect called Lifetime Community Rating (LCR). This means that when you hit 35, it costs you more to take out a health insurance policy compared to when you were 34. And, unfortunately, the older you are, the more you'll be charged, as there is a 2% loading each year, so a 39-year-old will be charged 10% more for their health cover while a 44-year-old will be charged 20% more.

I've had health insurance before so the LCR won't affect me as much.

FACT

One of the few loopholes in the LCR is that you can benefit from health insurance you had in the past. This is really important for people who dropped their policy because they couldn't afford it for any reason. Here's how it works: if you are 50 years old and want to sign up to a health insurance policy, you should be liable to pay 32% more than a 34-year-old. But say you had health insurance for 10 years from 2000 to 2010, then that 10 years will be subtracted from your loading and you'll only have to pay 12% more. Also, don't worry if you don't have the paperwork for the policies. The health insurers are working on a data-sharing mechanism to prove people had cover in the past. Another loophole is that if you had to drop your cover due to redundancy, insurers are allowed to give you three years' cover off the age loading, but the details of this are still being worked upon.

I've been working abroad and the LCR won't affect me either.

FACT

Yes, this is another handy loophole. Whether you've been backpacking around South America or had a respectable job in Sydney, if you've been living away and want

health insurance when you return, you won't be hit with those pricey loadings. The only thing is you can't wait around. You need to sign up within nine months of returning home and must prove you've been away so payslips and air-plane tickets will come in handy.

If I upgrade to a better policy, I can avail of the benefits immediately.

FICTION

Took out a basic health insurance plan when you were a young one on minimum wage? Thinking now that you're a responsible adult, you should pay for a better policy? Well your health insurance provider will be more than happy to take your money and upgrade you to a better package. However, the benefits of that new policy won't kick in for quite some time – two years, to be precise. And if you are over 65 you could be waiting five years. So it's best to look to the future and anticipate the cover you would like then and get it sorted as soon as possible.

If I don't take out health insurance, I have no other options to help me out with medical expenses.

FICTION

If you can't afford health insurance or simply don't believe it is for you, then that's totally your call. But it is advisable to have some kind of saving scheme plan for any unfortunate healthcare accidents or emergencies that may come your way. One option is a health cash plan such as the HSF Health Plan. This isn't a health insurance policy and by signing up you won't be able to avoid the LCR loadings, but it's cheaper and very handy if something goes wrong. There are a range of plans to suit all budgets and give refunds on a range of medical expenses such as dental, GP fees, physiotherapy and consultant fees. It won't help you skip the queues in the public sector or get you a private room, but it will refund you €80 per night for up to 40 nights spent in hospital per year so you won't be caught with a nasty bill. ☺

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