

18 Million Avoidable Hospital Emergency Department Visits Add \$32 Billion in Costs to the Health Care System Each Year: Methodology and Citations

Methodology

UnitedHealthcare 2018 claims for individuals with employer coverage were analyzed using the New York University hospital ED algorithm, a widely used framework for classifying ED visits based on a probabilistic analysis of the discharge diagnosis. The algorithm estimates the share of visits that are: (1) non-emergent and primary care treatable, (2) emergent but primary care treatable, (3) ED needed but preventable, or (4) ED needed and not preventable, after excluding visits related to injuries, behavioral health, and other categories (which together account for an estimated 19 million ED visits each year among privately insured individuals). The resulting distribution was applied to U.S. Centers for Disease Control estimates of the annual number of ED visits by all privately insured individuals in the U.S. The average cost of ED visits by privately insured individuals for a set of 10 common conditions frequently treated at EDs (bronchitis, cough, dizziness, flu, headache, low back pain, nausea, sore throat, strep throat, and upper respiratory infection – each of which was assessed to be primary care treatable between 75 percent and 94 percent of the time) was calculated and compared across EDs, physician offices, and urgent care centers; the average cost difference was applied to the number of avoidable ED visits by privately insured individuals to estimate potential annual savings.

Citations

¹ UnitedHealthcare analysis conducted in 2019 of U.S. commercial claims from 2018.

² UnitedHealthcare analysis, 2019.

Visits classified according to the the New York University ED algorithm:

www.wagner.nyu.edu/faculty/billings/nyued-background

Centers for Disease Control (CDC), "National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Care Survey: 2016 Emergency Department Summary Tables," Table 6.

www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhamcs/web_tables/2016_ed_web_tables.pdf

The brief is available at: www.unitedhealthgroup.com/primarycare.