

Poll: Americans fear crippling medical bills more than illness

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(HealthDay)—Medical care costs in the United States can be so

overwhelming that Americans fear the cost of treatment more than the illness itself, a new poll shows.

"It's shocking and unacceptable that medical bills strike more fear in the hearts of Americans than serious illness," said Shelley Lyford.

She is president and CEO of West Health Institute, a San Diego-based research group that teamed up with NORC at the University of Chicago to conduct the nationwide poll.

More [respondents](#) (40 percent) feared the cost of treating a serious illness than feared becoming ill (33 percent).

The poll, of more than 1,300 adults, also found that 44 percent had not gone to the doctor when they were sick or injured within the past year, and 40 percent had skipped a suggested medical test or treatment because of the expense.

Nearly half of the respondents said they also went without a dental checkup or cleaning in the past year, and 4 out of 10 said they didn't see a dentist when they needed care.

Thirty percent said they had been forced to choose between paying for [medical bills](#) or necessities such as food, heating or housing in the past year.

About one-third said they had not filled a prescription or took less than the prescribed dose to save money.

And respondents who said they didn't get a recommended test or treatment were about twice as likely to fear getting sick (47 percent vs. 24 percent) and to fret about the [costs](#) of care (60 percent vs. 27 percent).

"The high cost of [health care](#) has become a public [health](#) crisis that cuts across all ages as more Americans are delaying or going without recommended medical tests and treatments," said Dr. Zia Agha of West Health.

Respondents' fears were not unfounded: More than half said they had experienced serious financial issues due to medical costs.

Thirty-six percent said they had used up all or most of their savings; 32 percent had to borrow money or increase [credit card debt](#); and 41 percent were forced to reduce contributions to savings plans.

More than half said they had been billed for something they thought was covered by health insurance, and a similar percentage had received a medical bill that was higher than expected. More than a quarter of respondents had a medical bill turned over to a collection agency within the past year.

Even though \$3.3 trillion was spent on health care in the United States in 2016—17.9 percent of the nation's gross domestic product—three-quarters of the poll respondents said Americans do not get good value for their money.

"According to this survey, most Americans do not feel they are getting a good value for their health care dollars, and the rising cost of health care is clearly having a direct consequence on Americans' health and financial well-being," Agha said in a news release from NORC at the University of Chicago.

The findings were presented Wednesday at an American Society on Aging conference, in San Francisco.

More information: The Kaiser Family Foundation has more on [health](#)

[costs.](#)

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