

Measuring defensive medicine costs on three hospital services

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About 28 percent of the orders for three services at three hospitals were judged to be at least partially defensive by the physicians who ordered them.

The overuse of [medical tests](#) and procedures driven by a fear of [malpractice lawsuits](#), commonly known as defensive medicine, has been estimated to cost \$46 billion annually in the U.S., although those costs have been measured indirectly.

The authors estimated the cost of defensive medicine on three services – tests, procedures or hospitalizations – by asking physicians to estimate the defensiveness of their own orders. The authors invited 42 hospitalist physicians to complete a survey, which 36 physicians did and rated 4,215 orders for 769 patients in the research letter.

Of the orders, 28 percent were rated as defensive and the mean cost was \$1,695 per patient, of which \$226 (13 percent) was defensive. Completely defensive orders represented about 2.9 percent of costs, mostly because of additional hospital days.

"In conclusion, although a large portion of hospital orders had some defensive component, our study found that few orders were completely defensive and that [physicians'](#) attitudes about [defensive medicine](#) did not correlate with cost. Our findings suggest that only a small portion of medical costs might be reduced by tort reform." Michael B. Rothberg, M.D., M.P.H., of the Cleveland Clinic, and colleagues wrote in their *JAMA Internal Medicine* article.

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