

Source: Business Insurance, 4/5/2016, Source: Business Insurance

Employers are expecting only modest increases in their group health care plan costs and are planning to take several actions to try to keep down future increases, according to a survey released Tuesday.

Employers surveyed by Willis Towers Watson P.L.C. said they expect costs to increase by an average of 4% in 2016. In 2015, costs increased by an average of 3.8%, according to an earlier Mercer L.L.C. survey.

Still, while employers expect only modest costs increases, they are considering various design changes to both keep costs under control and improve the quality of care.

As employers “consider a wide range of options, they are implementing changes that not only lower the rate of cost increases, but also achieve better health outcomes and improve the patient experience,” Randall Abbott, Willis Towers Watson senior health and benefit strategist in Boston, said in a statement.

For example, while 31% of employers use centers of excellence where patients can tap providers that specialize in certain medical services, 73% of employers said they may offer the centers by 2018.

In addition, while 22% of employers either own or sponsor onsite or near-site health centers, by 2018, that number could increase to 40%.

The survey also found that 90% of employers said they may offer telemedicine programs by 2018, up from 67% currently. Such programs can reap big cost savings such as when an employee develops a medical problem during a weekend and can get medical assistance over the phone rather than going to a hospital emergency room.

The survey, taken in January and February, is based on the responses of 467 midsize to large employers.