

Many Americans Worry About Cost of Long-Term Care: Poll

Harris Interactive/HealthDay survey also finds most are mistaken about how costs are covered now

By Amy Norton
HealthDay Reporter

MONDAY, Sept. 30 (HealthDay News) -- Worried about how you'll pay for long-term care in old age? You're not alone.

A new *Harris Interactive/HealthDay* poll finds that more than two-thirds of Americans are anxious and uncertain about how they'll meet nursing home or home care costs should they need them.



Most people were also wrong about how most of these costs are covered under the current system. About half (49 percent) mistakenly thought the bulk of the bill was paid by individuals, while one-third guessed Medicare. Only 19 percent understood that the major funder of long-term care is actually Medicaid, the government agency that covers health services for the poor.

One thing most people agreed on: as America ages, the problem of how to pay for seniors' long-term care will only get worse. Eighty-seven percent called the situation "serious" or "somewhat serious."

They're right to be worried, said Howard Gleckman, a fellow at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., who focuses on long-term care issues.

"This is a huge and growing problem," he said. There are currently about 12 million Americans in some form of long-term care, he noted, and that's expected to double within the next 20 years.

It's estimated that most Americans -- more than two-thirds of those aged 65 and up -- will need some type of long-term care, such as a nursing home, home health aide or adult "day care" center.

In the new poll, a similar percentage -- 68 percent -- expressed worry about how to pay for it all.

The problem of how to pay for rising costs of senior care was not addressed by the Affordable Care Act, or what some call "Obamacare." And Gleckman said that policymakers have shown no agreement on where to go from here.

As for the general public, past research proves that few of us even know how long-term care is currently financed, Gleckman noted. And the new poll confirms that.

For example, "very few people understand Medicaid's role in long-term care," Gleckman said. The problem for families is that Medicaid coverage only kicks in once people have spent down their assets enough to qualify for assistance.

The other option is for people to plan in advance and buy pricey private insurance that specifically covers long-term care. The poll found that 64 percent of Americans think "most people" should buy long-term care insurance.

But thinking that something sounds good, and actually doing it for yourself are two distinct things, Gleckman pointed out. Based on current statistics, less than 8 percent of U.S. adults have bought long-term care insurance, he noted.

In the new poll, 79 percent said they supported the notion of tax breaks that would help people purchase long-term care insurance, with similar numbers of Republican and Democrat respondents in favor of such a move. Whether any tax perk would actually encourage more Americans to invest in private insurance is the big question, Gleckman said.

With the age of the average voter steadily rising, "how we will pay for long-term care in the future is likely to become a huge political issue," added Harris Poll chairman Humphrey Taylor. "The cost is already well over \$200 billion and is almost certain to grow rapidly as many more baby boomers grow older."

Just last week, the federal Long-Term Care Commission -- an expert panel established by Congress -- issued recommendations on how to improve the delivery of long-term care.

"Where they couldn't reach any consensus at all," Gleckman said, "was how to finance it."

But in the new poll, he noted, the public showed a surprising amount of agreement on some financing options. Over two-thirds were in favor of a "new government program" to help out. Even among Republicans, half liked the idea -- which was particularly striking, Gleckman said.

Another expert in long-term care said the poll shows that Americans are becoming more aware of the issue.

"Most Americans now will live for some years with an inability to take care of themselves due to the illnesses associated with advanced old age," said Dr. Joanne Lynn, director of the Center for Elder Care and Advanced Illness at the non-profit Altarum Institute.

"This will be the most expensive part of most of our lives," Lynn said, "yet insurance does not cover it -- at least not until the person has spent down to poverty, when Medicaid will pitch in."

She added that "very few" Americans can save enough money to pay for long-term care in their final years. "It's good that most Americans are beginning to recognize the need for some public support," she said.

According to Gleckman, the financing solution does not have to be strictly "private" or "public," but could involve some mix.

One possibility, he said, is a program where private insurers sell long-term care coverage "under the auspices" of the Medicare program -- similar to the current "Medigap" system, where older adults can get supplemental private insurance for services that Medicare does not cover.

Everyone agreed that the long-term care problem is only going to get more complex in the years to come. Not only will there be more elderly Americans in need, there will also be fewer family caregivers.

"Lower birth rates mean there are going to be fewer and fewer adult children available to provide care," Gleckman said.

The baby boomers who are caring for an elderly parent, or have in the past, already know the shortcomings of the current system, according to Lynn.

"Their frustration should fuel real reforms," she said.

The Harris Interactive/HealthDay Poll is based on interviews with 2,013 adults who were surveyed online between Sept. 10 and 12, 2013.

More information

There's more on issues surrounding long-term care at the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#).
 SOURCES: Howard Gleckman, resident fellow, Urban Institute, Washington, D.C.; Joanne Lynn, M.D., director, Center for Elder Care and Advanced Illness, Altarum Institute, Ann Arbor, Mich.; *Harris Interactive/HealthDay* poll, Sept. 10-12, 2013

TABLES

Table 1: Who Pays Most of the Cost of Long Term Care?

Q. The next few questions are about long term care, such as nursing home or home care services that are often used by the frail elderly who cannot manage living at home without help.

Which one of the following do you think pays for most of the cost of elderly patient long term care now?

Base: All Adults

		Age					
	Total %	18-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-64	65+
Individuals (and their families)	49	45	44	51	51	49	48
Medicare	33	29	44	37	36	31	24
Medicaid	19	27	12	12	13	19	28

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding

Table 2: How Worried Are You About the Cost of Long Term Care

Q. How worried are you that you would not be able to afford the cost of long term care (in a nursing home or home care) if you needed it later in life?

Base: All Adults

		Age						Sex	
	Total %	18-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-64	65+	Male	Female
Very Worried	22	12	20	23	33	25	12	20	23
Somewhat Worried	46	37	52	48	48	44	50	41	51
Not Very Worried	22	30	15	20	14	24	26	23	20
Not At All Worried	10	21	13	9	5	8	12	15	6

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding

Table 3: Should Most People Buy Long Term Care Insurance?

Q. Do you think that most people should buy long term care insurance that would pay part of the cost of a nursing home or home care?

Base: All Adults

		Age					
	Total %	18-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-64	65+
Yes	64	62	69	67	66	62	60
No	36	38	31	33	34	38	40

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding

Table 4: How Serious A Problem Is The Cost Of Long Term Care?

Q. The U.S. spends over 200 billion dollars annually on long term care, and this figure is expected to increase significantly as Baby Boomers continue to grow older and the number of frail elderly people, including those with Alzheimer's and other disabilities, increase.

How serious a financial problem do you think this will be?

Base: All Adults

	Total %
Very Serious Problem	42
Somewhat Serious Problem	45
Minor Problem	10
Not a Problem At All	2

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding

Table 5: Who Should Pay For Most Of The Cost Of Long Term Care and Insurance?

Q. In the future, which of the following do you think should pay for most of the cost of long term care and long term care insurance?

Base: All Adults

	Total %	Political Affiliation		
		Republican	Democrat	Independent
The Individuals (and their families)	29	47	19	31
The Federal Government	27	15	36	27
State and Local Governments	9	8	11	6
Not Sure	34	30	35	36

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding

Table 6: Favor/Oppose Tax Break For Buying Insurance

Q. Please indicate if you favor or oppose each of the following:

Tax break for people who buy long term care insurance

Base: All Adults

	Total %	Political Affiliation		
		Republican	Democrat	Independent
All Who Favor (Net)	79	82	83	76
Strongly Favor	41	44	41	40
Somewhat Favor	38	38	42	36
All Who Oppose (Net)	11	9	9	13
Somewhat Oppose	6	4	6	8
Strongly Oppose	5	5	3	6
Not At All Sure	10	9	8	11

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding

Table 7: Favor/Oppose New Government Program To Pay For Long Term Care

Q. Please indicate if you favor or oppose each of the following:

New government program like Medicare and Medicaid designed to pay all or part of the cost of long term care

Base: All Adults

	Total %	Political Affiliation		
		Republican	Democrat	Independent
All Who Favor (Net)	68	50	81	68
Strongly Favor	36	23	47	32
Somewhat Favor	32	27	34	36
All Who Oppose (Net)	22	38	11	23
Somewhat Oppose	12	19	8	11
Strongly Oppose	10	19	3	12
Not At All Sure	10	11	8	9

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding

METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted online within the United States from September 10-12, 2013 among 2,028 adults (aged 18 and over) by Harris Interactive. Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the online population. Propensity score weighting was used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, and error associated with non-response, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, un-weighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

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