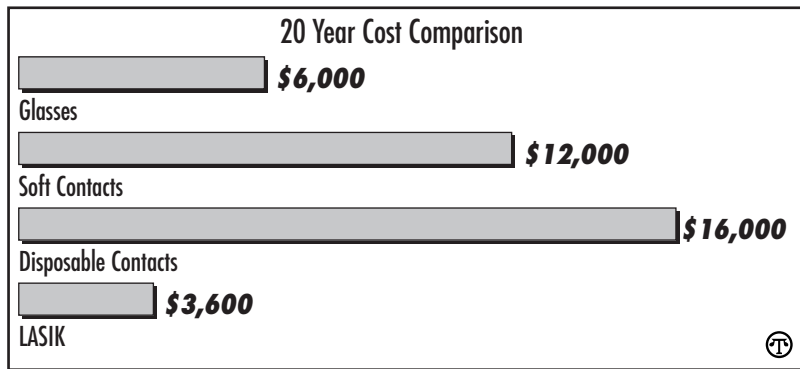


Health Insurance Companies Say “Eye” To Elective Procedures

(NAPSA)—It’s time for the annual barrage of health insurance paperwork and those difficult decisions about which health-care plan to choose to best suit your needs. Then, of course, there is the flexible health spending account dilemma. But as America’s workers pore through the fine print and evaluate their health spending needs, they should keep in mind that all health insurance plans are not created equal.

Increasingly, a growing number of insurance companies are covering surgeries and other medical procedures that were previously considered elective. The most frequently performed of these, LASIK, a vision improvement procedure that more than 1.3 million Americans are expected to undergo this year, may now be covered by some providers. For example, UnitedHealth Group, the nation’s second-largest health insurer, recently announced that it is offering discounts on LASIK in some of its plans.

Even if a patient’s insurance plan only covers a part of the procedure, which costs, on average, \$1,800 per eye, the remaining portion can be funded by taking



advantage of flexible health spending accounts. Today, most major companies offer these accounts allowing employees to earmark up to \$5,000 for a host of procedures ranging from cosmetic dental work to acupuncture, as well as LASIK. The major benefit—all the money allocated to health spending accounts is tax free.

Similar to a 401K plan, the money an employee decides to set aside is taken directly from his or her paycheck over the course of the entire year as opposed to one single withdrawal. It is important to plan ahead because unused money in flexible spending accounts will be forfeited. This year, the federal government has extended the deadline to spend the money in these

accounts until April of the following year. But remember not only to plan to have the money set aside—plan to set aside time for having the procedures done.

Even without the benefits of insurance coverage or flexible healthcare spending accounts, having LASIK may still save people money in the long run. When compared to the cost of glasses or contacts over a 20-year period, LASIK becomes the less expensive option. Glasses, for example, would cost \$6,000 and soft contacts \$12,000, according to industry estimates. Most LASIK patients would probably agree that you can’t put a price on the ability to wake up in the morning and clearly see your alarm clock.