

**A CONSUMER'S GUIDE
TO
GETTING AND KEEPING HEALTH INSURANCE
IN
TEXAS**

By

**Karen Pollitz
Stephanie Lewis
Robert Imes
Eliza Bangit**

**GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH CARE RESEARCH AND POLICY**

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This guide is intended to help consumers understand their protections under federal and state law. The authors have made every attempt to assure that the information presented in this guide is accurate as of the date of publication. However, the guide is a summary, and should not be used as a substitute for legal, accounting, or other expert professional advice. Readers should consult insurance regulators or other competent professionals for guidance in making health insurance decisions. The authors, Georgetown University, and the Institute for Health Care Research and Policy specifically disclaim any personal liability, loss or risk incurred as a consequence of the use and application, either directly or indirectly, of any information presented herein.

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A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO GETTING AND KEEPING HEALTH INSURANCE IN TEXAS

As a Texas resident, you have rights under federal and state law that will protect you when you seek to buy, keep, or switch your health insurance, even if you have a serious health condition.

This guide describes your protections as a Texas resident. Chapter 1 gives an overview of your protections. Chapters 2 and 3 explain your protections under group and individual health plans. Chapter 4 highlights your protections as a small employer. Chapter 5 summarizes help that may be available to you if you cannot afford health coverage. If you move away from Texas, your protections may change. Since this guide is a summary, it may not answer all of your questions. For places to contact for more information, see page 32. For information about how to find consumer guides for other states on the Internet, see page 32. A list of helpful terms and their definitions begins on page 33. These terms are in **boldface type** the first time they appear.

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CHAPTER 1

A SUMMARY OF YOUR PROTECTIONS

Numerous state and federal laws make it easier for people with pre-existing conditions to get or keep health insurance, or to change from one health plan to another. A federal law, known as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) sets national standards for all health plans. In addition, states can pass different reforms for the health plans they regulate (fully insured group health plans and individual health plans), so your protections may vary if you leave Texas. Neither federal nor state laws protect your access to health insurance in all circumstances. So please read this guide carefully.

The following information summarizes how federal and state laws do – or do not – protect you as a Texas resident.

HOW AM I PROTECTED?

In Texas, as in many other states, your health insurance options are somewhat dependent on your **health status**. Even if you are sick, however the laws protect you in the following ways.

- *Coverage under your **group health plan** (if your employer offers one) cannot be denied or limited, nor can you be required to pay more, because of your health status. This is called **nondiscrimination**. (See page 7.)*
- *All group health plans in Texas must limit exclusion of pre-existing conditions. There are rules about what counts as a pre-existing condition and how long you must wait before a new group health plan will begin to pay for care for that condition. Generally, if you join a new group health plan, your old coverage will be credited toward the **pre-existing condition exclusion period**, provided you did not have a long break in coverage. (See page 9.)*
- *Your health insurance cannot be canceled because you get sick. Most health coverage is **guaranteed renewable**. (See pages 18 and 26.)*
- *If you leave your job, you may be able to remain in your old group health plan for a certain length of time. This is called **COBRA** or **state continuation coverage**. For example, it can help when you are between jobs, or when you retire early and are not yet eligible for Medicare. There are limits on what you can be charged for this coverage. (See page 19.)*

- *If you lose your group health insurance and meet other qualifications, you will be **federally eligible**. If so, you can buy an individual health plan from the **Texas Health Insurance Risk Pool (Health Pool)**. You will not face a new pre-existing condition exclusion period if you are federally eligible. There are limits on what you can be charged for a Health Pool policy. (See page 23.)*
- *If you are not federally eligible and have had difficulty obtaining affordable individual health coverage because of your health condition, you may also be eligible for Health Pool coverage. If you qualify for Health Pool coverage because of health reasons and you have had no previous health coverage, you may face a new pre-existing condition exclusion period. There are limits on what you can be charged for a Health Pool policy, too. (See page 23.)*
- *If you are a small employer buying a fully insured **small group health plan**, you cannot be turned down because of the health status, age, or any factor that might predict the use of health services of those in your group. All fully insured health plans for small employers must be sold on a **guaranteed issue** basis. (See page 26.)*
- *If you are a small employer buying a fully insured group health plan, there are limits on what you can be charged due to the health status, age, gender, or occupation of those in your group. (See page 26.)*
- *If you have low or modest household income, you may be eligible for free or subsidized health coverage for yourself or members of your family. The Texas **Medicaid** program offers free health coverage for pregnant women, families with children, elderly and disabled individuals with very low incomes. In addition, the **Texas Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)** offers subsidized health coverage for certain uninsured children. (See page 28.)*

WHAT ARE THE LIMITS ON MY PROTECTIONS?

As important as they are, the federal and state health insurance reforms are limited. Therefore, you also should understand how the laws do *not* protect you.

- *If you change jobs, you usually cannot take your old group health coverage with you. Except when you exercise your federal COBRA or state continuation rights, you are not entitled to take your actual group health coverage with you when you leave a job. Your new health plan may not cover all of the benefits or include the same doctors that your old health plan did.*

- *Employers are not required to provide health benefits for their employees, so if you change jobs, you may find that your new employer does not offer you health coverage. Employers are required only to make sure that their decision is based on factors unrelated to your health status.*
- *If you get a new job with health benefits, your coverage may not start right away. Employers can impose **waiting periods** before your health benefits begin. **HMOs** can impose **affiliation periods**. (See page 9.)*
- *If you have a break in coverage of 63 days or more, you may have to satisfy a new pre-existing condition exclusion period when you join a new group health plan. If you had some prior health coverage, you may not have to satisfy the entire pre-existing condition exclusion period. (See pages 9 and 17.)*
- *Even if your coverage is **continuous**, there may be a pre-existing condition exclusion period for some benefits if you join a **self-insured group health plan** that covers benefits your old group plan did not. For example, say you move from a group plan that does not cover prescription drugs to one that does. You may have to wait up to one year before your new health plan will pay for drugs prescribed to treat a pre-existing condition. This type of pre-existing exclusion period cannot be imposed on you if you are joining a fully insured health plan. (See page 9.)*
- *If you work for certain non-federal public employers in Texas, not all of the group health plan protections may apply to you. (See page 13.)*
- *In Texas, your access to individual health coverage may depend on your health status. Private **insurers** and HMOs are not prohibited from turning you down or charging you more because of your health condition. If you are federally eligible, the Health Pool is your only guaranteed access to individual health insurance, though you may be able to buy individual health coverage from private insurers and HMOs. (See page 16.)*

CHAPTER 2

YOUR PROTECTIONS UNDER GROUP HEALTH PLANS

This chapter describes the protections that you have in group health plans, such as those offered by employers or labor unions. Your protections will vary somewhat, depending on whether your plan is a fully insured group health plan or a self-insured group health plan. The plan's benefits information must indicate whether the plan is self-insured.

WHEN DOES A GROUP HEALTH PLAN HAVE TO LET ME IN?

- *You have to be eligible for the group health plan.* For example, large employers do not have to offer health coverage to all their employees.
- *You cannot be turned away or charged more because of your health status.* Health status means your medical condition or history, **genetic information**, or disability. This protection is called nondiscrimination. Large employers may refuse or restrict coverage for other reasons (such as part time employment), as long as these are unrelated to health status and applied consistently. Small employers, on the other hand, must offer coverage to all of their eligible employees.

Discrimination due to health status is not permitted

The Acme Company has 200 employees and offers two different health plans. Full time employees are offered a high option plan that covers prescription drugs; part time employees are offered a low option plan that does not. This is *permitted* under the law. By contrast, in a cost-cutting move, Acme restricts its high option plan to those employees who can pass a physical examination. This is *not permitted* under the law.

- *You must be given a special opportunity to sign up for your group health plan if certain changes happen to your family.* In addition to any regular **enrollment period** your employer or group health plan offers, you must be offered a special, 30-day opportunity to enroll in your self-insured group health plan after certain events. If you are enrolled in a fully insured group plan, your **special enrollment period** must last 31 days. You can elect coverage during this time. If your group plan offers family coverage, your dependents can elect coverage as well. Enrollment during a special enrollment period is *not* considered **late enrollment**.

Certain changes can trigger a special enrollment opportunity

- The birth, adoption, or placement for adoption of a child
- Marriage
- Loss of other coverage (for example, that you or your dependents had through yourself or another family member and lost because of death, divorce, legal separation, termination, retirement, or reduction in hours worked)

- *In Texas, if you work for a small employer and receive health coverage through your employer's fully insured plan, the plan must also offer coverage for your spouse and dependents. A fully insured large employer plan is not required to provide spousal and dependent coverage, but if it does, it must offer to cover each eligible spouse and dependent.*
- *In Texas, newborns, adopted children, and children you are seeking to adopt are automatically covered under the parents' fully insured group health plan for the first 31 days, if the plan covers dependents. The health plan may require that the parent enroll the child within the 31 days in order to continue coverage beyond the 31 days.*
- *In Texas, adult dependents who are physically disabled or mentally retarded are able to stay on their parents' fully insured group health plan after they have reached the age at which the health plan usually cancels dependent coverage. In order to be eligible, the adult dependent must be incapable of self-support and must be dependent on the policyholder for support. Proof of incapacity must be provided to the health plan within 31 days of reaching the limiting age. The health plan may require that you show it proof of incapacity again in the future, but not more frequently than annually after the 2 year period following attainment of the limiting age.*
- *Texas requires fully insured group health plans to accept late enrollees, although you might have to wait until the next annual open enrollment period.*
- *When you begin a new job, your employer may impose a waiting period before you can sign up for health coverage. This waiting period, however, must be applied consistently and cannot vary due to your health status.*
- *When you begin a new job with health insurance through an HMO, the HMO may require you to satisfy an affiliation period before coverage begins. During this affiliation period, you will not have health insurance coverage. An HMO affiliation period cannot exceed 2 months (3 months for late enrollees), and you cannot be*

charged a premium during it. An affiliation period must run concurrently with any waiting period that your employer imposes.

- *If you have to take leave from your job due to illness, the birth or adoption of a child, or to care for a seriously ill family member, you may be able to keep your group health coverage for a limited time. A federal law known as the **Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)** guarantees you up to 12 weeks of job-protected leave in these circumstances.*

The FMLA applies to you if you work for a company with 50 or more employees.

If you qualify for leave under FMLA, your employer must continue your health benefits. You will have to continue paying your share of the premium.

If you decide not to return to work at the end of the leave period, your employer may require you to pay back the employer's share of the premium. However, if you don't return to work because of factors outside your control (such as a need to continue caring for a sick family member, or because your spouse is transferred to a job in a distant city), you will not have to repay the premium.

For more information on your rights under the FMLA, contact the **U.S. Department of Labor**.

CAN A GROUP HEALTH PLAN LIMIT MY COVERAGE FOR PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS?

When you first enroll in a group health plan, the employer or insurance company may ask if you have any pre-existing conditions. Or, if you make a claim during the first year of coverage, the plan may **look back** to see whether it was for such a condition. If so, it may try to exclude coverage for services related to that condition for a certain length of time. However, federal and state laws protect you by placing limits on these pre-existing condition exclusion periods under group health plans. In some cases your protections will vary, depending on the type of group health plan you belong to.

- *HMOs may not exclude coverage for pre-existing conditions. Instead, HMOs may impose an affiliation period before the health coverage begins.*
- *Other group health plans (including self-insured plans and fully insured non-HMO plans) can count as pre-existing conditions only those for which you actually received*

(or were recommended to receive) a diagnosis, treatment or medical advice within the 6 months immediately before you joined that plan or before the start of the waiting period. This period is also called the look back period.

- *Under self-insured and fully insured non-HMO group health plans, coverage for pre-existing conditions can be excluded for a limited time. The maximum period is 12 months. However, if you enroll late in your group health plan (after you are hired and not during a regular or special enrollment period), the rules are different.*

If you seek to enroll late in a self-insured group health plan, your pre-existing condition exclusion cannot exceed 18 months.

If you seek to enroll late in a fully insured group health plan in Texas, the plan must either admit you immediately or admit you at the next open enrollment period. Fully insured group health plans must have at least one 31-day open enrollment period each year. If the plan admits you immediately, you may have a pre-existing condition exclusion period for up to 18 months. If the plan requires you to wait until the next open enrollment period, you may have a pre-existing condition exclusion period of up to 12 months.

- *Group health plans cannot apply a pre-existing condition exclusion period for pregnancy, newborns, newly adopted children, children placed for adoption, or genetic information.*
- *When you join a new group health plan, the law protects you from a new pre-existing condition exclusion period, provided you maintain continuous **creditable coverage**.*

What is creditable coverage?

Most health coverage counts as creditable coverage, including, but not limited to:

Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHBP)	Medicare
Group health insurance (including COBRA)	Military health coverage (CHAMPUS, TRICARE)
Indian Health Service	State health insurance high risk pools
Individual health insurance	
Medicaid	
Short-term plans (<i>fully insured plans only</i>)	

In most cases, you should get a certificate of creditable coverage when you leave a health plan. You also can request certificates at other times. If you cannot get one, you can submit other proof, such as old health plan ID cards or statements from your doctor showing bills paid by your health plan.

Health coverage counts as continuous if it is not interrupted by a break of 63 days or more in a row.

In Texas, if you had a break in health coverage of more than 63 days in a row, and then enroll in a fully insured group health plan, that plan must give you credit for previous creditable coverage you had in effect at any time during the 12-month period preceding enrollment. *In determining continuous coverage, employer-imposed waiting periods and HMO affiliation periods do not count as a break in coverage.* If your new plan imposes a pre-existing condition exclusion period, the plan must credit time under your prior continuous coverage toward it. If your employer requires a waiting period, the pre-existing condition exclusion period begins on the first day of the waiting period.

Self-insured and fully insured group health plans credit continuous coverage differently

Take Art, who has diabetes. He had had health insurance every day of his life, since birth, until recently, when he was laid off for 3 months. Fortunately, Art then found a new job with health coverage at Ajax Company. Ajax has a self-insured group health plan that covers diabetes but excludes pre-existing conditions for 12 months. Because Art had a lapse in health coverage longer than 63 days in a row, Ajax's plan is not required to give him credit for his prior health coverage. Ajax's group health plan will pay for Art's diabetes care in 12 months.

Now consider a slightly different situation. Assume Ajax has a fully insured group health plan. In Texas, even if you have a break in health coverage longer than 63 days, fully insured group health plans must give you credit for any creditable coverage you had in force during the 12-month period preceding enrollment. Therefore, Ajax will give Art credit for 9 months of prior creditable coverage (12 months minus the 3-month lapse in health coverage). Art's pre-existing condition exclusion period will only be 3 months, at the end of which Ajax will begin paying for Art's diabetes care.

- *Your protections may differ if you move to a self-insured group health plan that offers more benefits than your old one did.* Self-insured plans can look back to determine whether your previous health plan covered prescription drugs, mental health, substance abuse, dental care, or vision care. If you did not have continuous coverage for one or more of these categories of benefits, your new self-insured group health plan may impose a pre-existing condition exclusion period for that category. Self-insured group plans that use this method of crediting prior coverage must use it for everyone and must disclose this to you when you enroll. Fully insured group plans in Texas do not use this method of crediting coverage.

Even if coverage is continuous, there may be an exclusion for certain benefits

Sue needs prescription medication to control her blood pressure. She had 2 years of continuous coverage under her employer's group health plan, which did not cover prescription drugs. Sue changes jobs, and her new employer's self-insured plan does cover prescription drugs. However, because her prior policy did not, the new plan refuses to cover her blood pressure medicine for 6 months.

Question: Is this permitted?

Answer: Yes. However, the plan must pay for covered doctor visits, hospital care, and other services for Sue's high blood pressure. It also must pay for covered prescription drugs she needs for other conditions that were not pre-existing.

- *No pre-existing condition exclusion period can be applied without appropriate notice. Your group health plan must inform you, in writing, if it intends to impose such a period. Also, if needed, it must help you get a **certificate of creditable coverage** from your old health plan.*

LIMITS TO PROTECTIONS FOR CERTAIN GOVERNMENT WORKERS

Federal law permits state, county, and local governments to exempt their employees in self-insured group health plans from some of the protections discussed previously in this chapter. Public employers must make this choice annually. When they do so, they are required to notify the federal government and specify which protections will not apply to their employees' group health plan.

According to the latest list available from the federal government, many public employers in Texas have decided that certain protections will not apply to their employees. (For a complete list, see the box below.) If you have group health coverage through these employers, you should contact them for more information. Other non-federal public employers in Texas may have made this choice after this guide was written. If you are not sure about your protections under your public employee health plan, you should contact your employer.

Texas public employers electing to exempt their covered employees from HIPAA protections.

Bexar County Hospital District (University Health System)	Bowie County Schools Health Co-Op
Brazosport Public Schools	City of Abilene
City of Amarillo	City of Austin
City of Brenham	City of Bryan
City of Carrollton	City of Colorado City
City of Dallas	City of Fredericksburg
City of Garland	City of Grand Prairie
City of Greenville	City of Huntsville
City of Kilgore	City of LaPorte
City of Lewisville	City of Longview
City of Lufkin	City of Marshall
City of McAllen	City of McKinney
City of Mesquite	City of Midland
City of Missouri City	City of New Braunfels
City of North Richland Hills	City of Paris
City of Rockwall	City of Rosenberg
City of San Antonio	City of Stephenville
City of Victoria	County of Anderson
County of Andrews	County of Bailey
County of Brazoria	County of Brazos
County of Burnet	County of Crane
County of Crockett	County of Dallas
County of Fayette	County of Fort Bend
County of Gaines	County of Galveston
County of Grayson	County of Harrison
County of Hidalgo	County of Jefferson
County of Liberty	County of Lubbock
County of Matagorda	County of Midland
County of Mitchell	County of Montgomery
County of Pecos	County of Rusk
County of Taylor	County of Tom Green
County of Tyler	County of Upshur
County of Victoria	County of Ward
County of Ward	County of Washington
County of Washington	County of Webb
County of Webb	County of Williamson
County of Williamson	County of Winkler
County of Zavala	Cuero Community Hospital
Education Service Center Multi-Regional Cooperative	Ellis County Co-op
Employees Retirement System of Texas	Fort Duncan Medical Center
Gainesville Memorial Hospital	Guadalupe Valley Hospital
Harris County Memorial Hospital	Heart of Texas Memorial Hospital
Independent School District of Alief	Independent School District of Allen
Independent School District of Alto	Independent School District of Alvin
Independent School District of Anahuac	Independent School District of Andrews
Independent School District of Angleton	Independent School District of Blackwell
Independent School District of Boerne	Independent School District of Brady
Independent School District of Brazos	Independent School District of Carrollton-Farmers Branch
Independent School District of Channelview	Independent School District of Clear Creek
Independent School District of Columbia-Brazoria	Independent School District of Coppell
Independent School District of Crandall	Independent School District of Crane
Independent School District of Deer Park	Independent School District of Denton
Independent School District of Dickinson	Independent School District of Donna
Independent School District of Dumas	Independent School District of East Central

Texas public employers electing to exempt their covered employees from HIPAA protections. (cont'd)

Independent School District of East Chambers	Independent School District of Floydada
Independent School District of Frenship	Independent School District of Friendswood
Independent School District of Galveston	Independent School District of Garland
Independent School District of Graham	Independent School District of Grayson County Cooperative
Independent School District of Greenwood	Independent School District of Haskell Consolidated
Independent School District of Hempstead	Independent School District of Humble
Independent School District of Kilgore	Independent School District of Kingsville
Independent School District of Knox City-O'Brien	Independent School District of La Joya
Independent School District of Lewisville	Independent School District of Liberty-Eylau
Independent School District of Los Fresnos Consolidated	Independent School District of Lumberton
Independent School District of Marshall	Independent School District of McAllen
Independent School District of McCarney	Independent School District of Mesquite
Independent School District of Mexia	Independent School District of Montgomery
Independent School District of Muleshoe	Independent School District of Nacogdoches
Independent School District of New Deal	Independent School District of North East
Independent School District of Paris	Independent School District of Pasadena
Independent School District of Pearland	Independent School District of Pecos-Barstow-Toyah
Independent School District of Plano	Independent School District of Point Isabel
Independent School District of Rice Consolidated	Independent School District of Richardson
Independent School District of Rusk	Independent School District of Sealy
Independent School District of Seguin	Independent School District of Snyder
Independent School District of Spring	Independent School District of Stamford County Line
Independent School District of Stanton	Independent School District of Sulphur Springs
Independent School District of Sweetwater	Independent School District of Texarkana
Independent School District of Texas City	Independent School District of Tomball
Independent School District of Tyler	Independent School District of Uvalde Consolidated
Independent School District of Van	Independent School District of Victoria
Independent School District of Weatherford	Independent School District of Willis
Independent School District of Wink-Loving	Independent School District of Woodville
Nocona General Hospital	Nolan County Hospital (Rolling Plains Memorial Hospital)
North Texas Tollway Authority Cooperative	Permian Basin Community Centers
R.E. Thomason General Hospital	Reeves County Hospital District
South Plains Schools Co-Op	Texas Educational Benefits Association
Texas Municipal League	Texas Schools Health Benefits Program
The University of Texas System	Uvalde Memorial Hospital
Ward Memorial Hospital	West Texas School Co-op
Independent School District of Klein	
Independent School District of Houston-Trinity County Cooperative	
Independent School District of Regional III Medical Cooperative	
Independent School District of Regional XVII Medical Cooperative	

AS YOU ARE LEAVING GROUP COVERAGE...

- *If you are leaving your job or otherwise losing access to your group health coverage, you may be able to remain covered under the group health plan for a limited time. In addition, you may have special protections when buying certain kinds of individual health coverage. See Chapter 3 for more information about COBRA continuation coverage, state continuation coverage, and health coverage for “federally eligible individuals.”*

CHAPTER 3

YOUR PROTECTIONS WHEN BUYING INDIVIDUAL HEALTH INSURANCE

If you do not have access to employer-sponsored health coverage, you may want to buy an individual health plan from a private insurer or HMO. However, in Texas – as in most other states – you have limited guaranteed access to individual health insurance in the private market. There are some alternatives to private individual health insurance coverage – such as COBRA coverage, state continuation coverage, and Texas Health Insurance Risk Pool coverage. This chapter summarizes your protections under different kinds of health plan coverage.

INDIVIDUAL HEALTH COVERAGE SOLD BY PRIVATE INSURERS & HMOS

WHEN DO HEALTH PLANS HAVE TO SELL ME INDIVIDUAL COVERAGE?

In Texas, your ability to buy individual health coverage may depend on your health status.

- *In general, companies that sell individual health plans in Texas are free to turn you down because of your health status and other factors.* When applying for individual health coverage, you may be asked questions about health conditions you have now or had in the past. Depending on your health status, insurers and HMOs might refuse to sell you coverage or offer to sell you a health plan that has special limitations on what it covers.
- *Persons who are federally eligible are not guaranteed the right to buy individual health coverage from private insurers and HMOs.* However, they are guaranteed health coverage from the Texas Health Insurance Risk Pool. (See below.)
- *In Texas, newborns, adopted children, and children placed for adoption are automatically covered under the parents' individual health plan for the first 31 days, if the plan provides coverage for dependents or maternity benefits.* The health plan may require that the parent enroll the child within the 31 days in order to continue coverage beyond the 31 days.
- *In Texas, adult dependents with physical disabilities or mental retardation are able to stay on their parents' individual health plan after they have reached the age at which*

the plan usually cancels dependent coverage. In order to be eligible, the adult dependent must be incapable of self-support and must be dependent on the policyholder for support. Proof of incapacity must be provided to the health plan within 31 days of reaching the limiting age. The health plan may require that you show it proof of incapacity again in the future, but not more frequently than annually after the 2 year period following the attainment of the limiting age.

WHAT WILL MY INDIVIDUAL HEALTH PLAN COVER?

- *It depends on what you buy.* Texas does not require health insurers and HMOs in the individual market to sell standardized health plans. Health insurers and HMOs can design different plans and you will have to read and compare them carefully. Health plans are required to provide you with written descriptions of their products so that you can compare the differences. Texas does require all individual health plans to cover certain benefits – such as post-delivery hospital stays (if the plan covers maternity benefits) and mammograms. Check with the Texas Department of Insurance for more information about mandated benefits.

WHAT ABOUT COVERAGE FOR MY PRE-EXISTING CONDITION?

- *Individual health plans offered by HMOs cannot contain a pre-existing condition exclusion period.*
- *Non-HMO individual health plans in Texas are allowed, in general, to exclude coverage for your pre-existing conditions for up to 2 years.* However, if the individual health plan does not ask you questions about your health or medical treatment history when you apply for health coverage and it does not exclude a condition by name on your policy, it can only exclude pre-existing conditions for 12 months.
- *A non-HMO individual health plan may also offer you a contract containing an amendment that puts a permanent exclusion on coverage for a health condition, a body part, or a body system.* This type of amendment is known as an **elimination rider**.
- *When determining if a claim is for the treatment of a pre-existing condition, an individual non-HMO health plan is allowed to look back 5 years.* In an individual health plan, the definition of a pre-existing condition is a condition that you actually

received care for, as well as one that the insurer thinks that most people in your situation would have gotten care for during the 5-year period before you applied for health coverage. This is called the **prudent person rule**. In Texas, pregnancy can be considered a pre-existing condition in individual health plans, but genetic information cannot.

- *Individual health plans have to give you credit for your prior continuous coverage if your most recent coverage was under a group, government, or church plan.* The same types of coverage that are creditable in fully insured group health plans are also considered creditable in individual health plans. Coverage is considered continuous if the gap between health plans is less than 63 days. If you have 18 months of continuous creditable coverage, you will not face a pre-existing condition exclusion period.

If your gap in health coverage was 63 days or more and your most recent coverage was under a group, government, or church plan, you must be given credit for any creditable coverage in effect at any time during the 18 months preceding your application for coverage. This means that although you will have a pre-existing condition exclusion period, it will be shorter than it would otherwise be.

WHAT CAN I BE CHARGED FOR INDIVIDUAL HEALTH COVERAGE?

- *If you have an expensive health condition, your individual health plan premiums may be very high.* Texas law does not prohibit health insurers from charging you more because of your health status.

In addition, when you renew your individual health coverage, an insurer can increase your premiums. Premium increases must be applied to all persons in your class and not on an individual basis. A class may be grouped by age, sex, or by each individual health plan product.

CAN MY INDIVIDUAL HEALTH PLAN BE CANCELLED?

- *Your health coverage cannot be canceled because you get sick.* This is called guaranteed renewability. You have this protection provided that you pay the premiums, do not defraud the company, and, in the case of HMO plans, continue to live in the plan service area. Your health coverage may also be cancelled if the insurer or HMO discontinues your health plan or withdraws from the individual market.

- *Some insurers sell short-term health plans.* Short-term policies are *not* guaranteed renewable. They will only cover you for a limited time, such as 12 months or less. If you want to renew coverage under a short-term health plan after it expires, you will have to reapply and there is no guarantee that the health plan will be-reissued at all or at the same price.

COBRA Qualifying Events

For employees

- Voluntary or involuntary termination of employment for reasons other than gross misconduct
- Reduction in numbers of hours worked

For spouses

- Loss of coverage by the employee because of one of the qualifying events listed above
- Covered employee becomes eligible for Medicare
- Divorce or legal separation of the covered employee
- Death of the covered employee

For dependent children

- Loss of coverage because of any of the qualifying events listed for spouses
- Loss of status as a dependent child under the plan rules

COBRA AND STATE CONTINUATION COVERAGE

WHEN DO I HAVE TO BE OFFERED COBRA COVERAGE?

If you are leaving your job and you had group health coverage, you may be able to stay in your group health plan for an extended time through COBRA and/or state continuation coverage. The information presented below was taken from publications prepared by the U.S. Department of Labor. You should contact it for more information about your rights under COBRA.

- *To qualify for COBRA continuation coverage, you must meet 3 criteria:*

First, you must work for an employer with 20 or more employees. If you work for an employer with 2-19 employees, you may qualify for state continuation coverage. (See below.)

Second, you must be covered under the employer's group health plan as an employee or as the spouse or dependent child of an employee.

Finally, you must have a qualifying event that would cause you to lose your group health coverage. (See box below.)

How Long Can COBRA Coverage Last?		
<u>Qualifying event(s)</u>	<u>Eligible person(s)</u>	<u>Coverage</u>
Termination Reduced hours	Employee Spouse Dependent child	18 months *
Employee enrolls in Medicare Divorce or legal separation Death of covered employee	Spouse Dependent child	36 months
Loss of "dependent child" status	Dependent child	36 months

* Certain disabled persons and their eligible family members can extend coverage an additional 11 months, for a total of up to 29 months.

- *Each person who is eligible for COBRA continuation can make their own decision. If your dependents were covered under your employer plan, they may independently elect COBRA coverage as well.*
- *You must be notified of your COBRA rights when you join the group health plan, and again if you qualify for COBRA coverage. The notice rules are somewhat complicated and you should contact the U.S. Department of Labor for more information.*

In general, if the event that qualifies you for COBRA coverage involves the death, termination, reduction in hours worked, or Medicare eligibility of a covered worker, the employer has 30 days to notify the group health plan of this event. However, if the qualifying event involves divorce or legal separation or loss of dependent status, YOU have 60 days to notify the group health plan. Once it has been notified of the qualifying event, the group health plan has 14 days to send you a notice about how to elect COBRA coverage. Each member of your family eligible for COBRA coverage then has 60 days to make this election.

Once you elect COBRA, coverage will begin retroactive to the qualifying event. You will have to pay premiums dating back to this period.

- *To qualify as federally eligible, you must choose and use up any COBRA or state continuation coverage available to you.*

WHAT WILL COBRA COVER?

- *Your covered health benefits under COBRA will be the same as those you had before you qualified for COBRA.* For example, if you had coverage for medical, hospitalization, dental, vision, and prescription drug benefits before COBRA, you can continue coverage for all of these benefits under COBRA. If these benefits were covered under more than one plan (for example, a separate health insurance and dental insurance plan) you can choose to continue coverage under any or all of the plans. Life insurance is not covered by COBRA.

If your employer changes the health benefits package after your qualifying event, you must be offered coverage identical to that available to other active employees who are covered under the plan.

WHAT ABOUT COVERAGE FOR MY PRE-EXISTING CONDITION?

- *Because your group coverage is continuing, you will not have a new pre-existing condition exclusion period under COBRA.* However, if you were in the middle of a pre-existing condition exclusion period when your qualifying event occurred, you will have to finish it.

WHAT CAN I BE CHARGED FOR COBRA COVERAGE?

- *You must pay the entire premium (employer and employee share, plus a 2% administrative fee) for COBRA continuation coverage.* The first premium must be paid within 45 days of electing COBRA coverage.
- *If you elect the 11-month disability extension, the premium will increase to 150% of the total cost of coverage.* See below for more information about the disability extension.

HOW LONG DOES COBRA COVERAGE LAST?

- *COBRA coverage generally lasts up to 18 months and cannot be renewed.* However, certain disabled people can opt for coverage up to 29 months, and dependents are

sometimes eligible for up to 36 months of COBRA continuation coverage, depending on their qualifying event. (See box.)

- *Usually, COBRA continuation coverage ends when you join a new health plan. However, if your new plan has a waiting period or a pre-existing condition exclusion period, you can keep whatever COBRA continuation coverage you have left during that period. For specifics, ask your former employer or contact the U.S. Department of Labor.*
- *COBRA coverage also ends if your employer stops offering health benefits to other employees.*
- *COBRA coverage might end if you are in a managed care plan that is available only to people living in a limited geographic area and you move out of that area. However, if you are eligible for COBRA and are moving out of your current health plan's service area, your employer must provide you with the opportunity to switch to a different plan, but only if the employer already offers other plans to its employees. Examples of the other plans your employer may offer you are a managed care plan whose service area includes the area you are moving to, or another plan that does not have a limited service area.*

STATE CONTINUATION COVERAGE

- *If your employer offers a fully insured group health plan, you may also be eligible for continuation coverage under some Texas laws that are similar to COBRA. Eligibility requirements for state continuation coverage are similar to those for COBRA. In addition, Texas has a continuation law to provide health coverage for workers during a labor dispute or strike. To get continuation coverage, you must have been covered under your group health plan for a minimum length of time and you must request continuation coverage within a certain time limit. Ask your former employer or the Texas Department of Insurance about state continuation coverage if you think it applies to you.*

To be federally eligible, you must meet certain criteria

No matter where you live in the U.S., if you are federally eligible you are guaranteed the right to buy individual health coverage of some kind with no pre-existing condition exclusion periods. In Texas, you are guaranteed the right to buy coverage only from the Health Pool. To be federally eligible, you must meet all of the following:

- You must have had 18 months of continuous creditable coverage, *at least the last day of which was under a group health plan.*
- You also must have used up any COBRA or state continuation coverage for which you were eligible.
- You must not be eligible for Medicare, Medicaid or a group health plan.
- You must not have health insurance. (Note, however, if you know your group coverage is about to end, you can apply for coverage for which you *will* be federally eligible.)
- You must apply for health insurance for which you are federally eligible within 63 days of losing your prior coverage.

Federal eligibility ends when you enroll in an individual plan, because the last day of your continuous health coverage must have been in a group plan. You can become federally eligible again by maintaining continuous coverage and rejoining a group health plan.

TEXAS HEALTH INSURANCE RISK POOL (HEALTH POOL)

Texas has a risk pool program, called the Texas Health Insurance Risk Pool (Health Pool) that offers health coverage for persons who are federally eligible and for people with expensive health conditions who are unable to buy individual coverage.

WHEN CAN I GET COVERAGE FROM THE HEALTH POOL?

- *If you are federally eligible, you can buy health insurance from the Health Pool.*
- *If you are not federally eligible, you can buy coverage from the Health Pool if you have lived in Texas for at least 30 days and can demonstrate proof of eligibility.*

There are many different ways to show eligibility:

You were turned down for coverage by an insurer or HMO because of your health;

You received a certificate from an agent saying that the agent would be unable to find coverage for you because of your health;

You were offered coverage by an insurer, but the health plan contained an elimination rider that would have reduced the benefits you would receive from the health plan;

You were offered coverage by an insurer or HMO, but it would have been more expensive than buying coverage from the Health Pool; or

You have been diagnosed with a serious health condition, for example, cancer, epilepsy, or AIDS.

You only need to show that you are eligible in one of these ways in order to get Health Pool coverage. The Health Pool requires that you not be eligible for other, similar employer-based coverage before you can get coverage from the Health Pool.

- *The Health Pool offers family coverage, so if one person in your family qualifies, your family (including spouses, dependent children, and dependent grandchildren) can get Health Pool coverage. Each person in your family will be assessed a separate premium.*

WHAT WILL THE HEALTH POOL COVER?

- *Health Pool coverage includes hospital and physician care, maternity services, prescription drugs, treatment for serious mental health illness, and other services. Two plan options are available with varying deductibles and coinsurance maximums. Both plans are preferred provider organization (PPO) plans. This means that when you receive care from a health care provider within the network, the plan will pay more than if you get care from a provider outside the network.*

WHAT ABOUT COVERAGE FOR MY PRE-EXISTING CONDITION?

- *If you are federally eligible, your health coverage will not be subject to a pre-existing condition exclusion when you enroll in the Health Pool.*
- *If you are not federally eligible, you may have a 12-month pre-existing condition exclusion period when you first enroll in the Health Pool. When you enroll, the Health Pool will look back 6 months to see if you had a condition for which you*

actually received a diagnosis, medical advice, or treatment. Pregnancy can be considered a pre-existing condition. Elimination riders are not permitted on the Health Pool plans.

If your break in coverage is less than 63 days and you had 12 months of prior coverage, no pre-existing condition exclusion will be imposed when you join the Health Pool. Even if your break in coverage is 63 days or more, the Health Pool will give you credit for any coverage that was in effect in the 12 months prior to the effective date of your Health Pool coverage. The Health Pool considers creditable coverage to include most types of prior individual or group health coverage that you may have had.

WHAT CAN I BE CHARGED FOR HEALTH POOL COVERAGE?

- *Premiums will vary based on the health plan you choose, your age and gender, the geographic area where you live, and whether you smoke. Health Pool rates are limited to twice the amount that a healthy person who bought a similar plan sold by a private insurer would pay.*

For example, a 24-year-old man who was a non-smoker and lived in an area where health care was less expensive than other parts of the state would pay \$73 to \$103 in monthly premiums, depending on which deductible option he chose. On the other hand, a 64-year-old man who was a non-smoker and lived in an area where health care was more expensive than other parts of the state would pay \$517 to \$746 in monthly premiums, depending on the deductible option he chose. Please note that Health Pool rates may have changed since this guide was written, so contact the Health Pool administrator for the most current information.

HOW LONG DOES HEALTH POOL COVERAGE LAST?

- *Coverage under the Health Pool is renewable as long as you pay your premiums, continue to reside in Texas, and meet other eligibility requirements. If you cancel your Health Pool coverage, you will not be able to reapply for coverage under the Health Pool for 12 months, unless you are federally eligible or you can show a good faith reason for canceling.*

CHAPTER 4

YOUR PROTECTIONS AS A SMALL EMPLOYER OR SELF-EMPLOYED PERSON

Federal law extends certain protections to employers seeking to buy health insurance for themselves and their workers. Texas has enacted reforms to expand some of these protections. Generally, small employers are those that employ 2-50 employees. Please note, however, that the definitions of small employer and employee are somewhat different under federal and state law. Check with the Texas Department of Insurance to be sure that you know which protections apply to your group.

DO INSURANCE COMPANIES HAVE TO SELL ME HEALTH INSURANCE?

- *With few exceptions, small employers cannot be turned down.* This is called guaranteed issue. If you employ at least 2 but not more than 50 employees, health insurers and HMOs must sell you any small group health plan they sell to other small employers. However, they can require that up to 75% your eligible employees sign up for coverage. They can also require you to pay a minimum share of your workers' premiums. If you are buying a **large group health plan** for 51 or more employees, your group can be turned down.
- *Small employers that provide health benefits must offer health coverage to all of their eligible employees, their spouses, and their dependents.*
- *Your group health coverage cannot be canceled because someone in your group becomes sick.* This is called guaranteed renewability and it applies to group plans of all sizes. Insurers and HMOs can impose other conditions, however. They can require you to meet minimum participation and contribution rates in order to renew your coverage. Additionally, they can refuse to renew your coverage for nonpayment of premiums or if you commit fraud, or if they are discontinuing that health plan or if they are withdrawing from the small employer market. In the case of discontinuance, they must give you a chance to buy other plans they sell to groups of your size.

CAN I BE CHARGED MORE BECAUSE OF MY GROUP'S HEALTH STATUS?

- *Within limits, you can be charged higher premiums based on the health, risk, and demographic characteristics of your group.* For small employers, Texas limits the

difference in premiums and the annual increase that can be charged. For groups with more than 50 employees, Texas does not limit premium variation or increases. If you have questions about your group health plan premiums, contact the Texas Department of Insurance.

WHAT HEALTH PLAN CHOICES DO I HAVE?

- *Insurers in the small employer market must offer small employers two standardized health plans in addition to the other plans they sell. Standardization helps you compare differences in cost and coverage. The two standardized health plans are called the catastrophic care plan and the basic plan. Both plans cover hospitalization, physician services, and maternity benefits. Optional benefit riders may be purchased to add coverage for mental health, prescription drugs, and other services. Different deductible options are available for each plan. Each plan also has PPO and non-PPO versions.*

WHAT IF I AM SELF-EMPLOYED?

- *If you are self-employed with no other workers, you are not eligible to buy a small employer group health plan on your own (though you may be able to join another group health plan through a family member). Therefore, the laws that protect employers' access to group health plans do not apply to you. Your access to health coverage is protected by the laws that apply to individuals. (See page 13.)*
- *If you are self-employed and buy your own health coverage, you are eligible to deduct an increasing percentage of the cost of your premium from your federal income tax. This deduction is 60% for 2000 and 2001, 70% for 2002, and 100% in 2003 and thereafter.*

A WORD ABOUT ASSOCIATION PLANS

- *Some small employers, self-employed people, and other individuals buy health coverage through professional or trade associations. The laws applying to association health coverage can be different than those for other health plans. Check with the Texas Department of Insurance about your protections in association health plans.*

CHAPTER 5

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Help is available to certain low-income residents of Texas who cannot afford to buy health insurance. Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) offer free or subsidized health insurance coverage, direct medical services or other help. This chapter provides summary information about these programs and contact information for further assistance.

MEDICAID

Medicaid is a program that provides health coverage to some low-income Texas residents. Medicaid covers families with children and pregnant women, medically needy individuals, the elderly, and people with disabilities, if state and federal guidelines are met. Legal residents who are not U.S. citizens may be eligible for Medicaid.

- *For certain categories of people, eligibility for Medicaid is based on the amount of your household income.*

In Texas you may be eligible for Medicaid if you are an infant, a child, pregnant, or a parent of a dependent child and your family income meets the Medicaid income standards.

Income eligibility levels for these categories are described below. Your assets and some expenses also may be taken into account, so you should contact the Texas Department of Human Services for more information.

Low income persons eligible for Medicaid in Texas

<u>Category</u>	<u>Income eligibility</u> (as percent of federal poverty level)
Infant	185% (monthly income of about \$2181 for family of 3)
Child 1-5	133%
Child 6-18	100%
Parent	24%
Pregnant woman	185%

* Eligibility information was compiled from secondary sources, including Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Families USA, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Covering Kids Program, and may have changed since this guide was published. Contact your state Medicaid program for the most up to date information and for other eligibility requirements that may apply.

To get an idea of how your income compares to the federal poverty level, use the federal poverty guideline issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for the year 2000:

<u>Size of Family Unit</u>	<u>Poverty Guideline (annual income)</u>
1	\$ 8,350
2	11,250
3	14,150

For larger families add \$2,900 for each additional person

So, for example, using this guideline, 200% of the federal poverty level for a family of 3 would be an annual income of \$28,300, or a monthly income of \$2,358.

Contact your state Medicaid program for the most up to date information and for other eligibility requirements that may apply.

- *Parents should know that when you get a job and your TANF benefits end, you generally can stay on Medicaid for a 12-month transitional period.*

In addition, your children may qualify for Medicaid if your family's income meets certain income standards. (See above.)

- *Poor elderly or disabled people who get **Supplemental Security Income (SSI)** benefits can also qualify for Medicaid.*

Disabled individuals should know that if your income earned from a job increases so that you no longer qualify for SSI, you may be able to continue your Medicaid coverage at least for a limited time.

- *People who have high medical expenses may also qualify for Medicaid.* You may qualify as medically needy if you have high medical expenses that, when subtracted from your income, would make you eligible for Medicaid coverage. For example, people who have to pay a lot for prescription drugs, nursing home care, or other long term care services sometimes qualify as medically needy if they don't have health insurance that covers these services.
- *Retired or disabled people who have low incomes and are enrolled in Medicare may also qualify for help from Medicaid.* Even though your income may be too high to qualify for Medicaid insurance coverage, there may be other ways Medicaid can help you.

If your household income is below the poverty level, Medicaid will pay your Medicare monthly premium and your Medicare deductibles and coinsurance. This is called the Qualified Medicare Beneficiary (QMB) program.

If your household income is below 120% of the poverty level, Medicaid will pay for your monthly Medicare premiums only. This is called the Specified Low-Income Medicare Beneficiary (SLMB) program.

Contact your local Department of Human Services for more information about other eligibility requirements.

- *There may be other ways that Medicaid can help.* To find out if you or other members of your family qualify for Medicaid, contact the Texas Department of Human Services. To obtain the locations and telephone numbers of sites near you call (800) 252-8263.

TEXAS CHILDREN'S HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAM (CHIP)

The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) is a state-designed program that provides health coverage to low-income children under the age of 19 who are not eligible for Medicaid and who have limited or no health coverage.

- *A child whose family has a household income below 200% of the federal poverty level is eligible for CHIP. For a family of 3, this works out to an annual income of about \$28,300, or a monthly income of about \$2,358.*
- *Eligibility is guaranteed for one year unless the child moves from the state, enrolls in Medicaid, or is found to have other health coverage.*
- *No child is denied eligibility based on disability.*
- *For more information, call (800) 647-6558.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION...

As a summary, this guide will not answer every question for every person in every circumstance. In addition, it is not a substitute for legal advice. If you have more questions, contact the agencies listed below or consult an attorney.

For questions about:	Contact:
Individual health insurance State continuation coverage Fully insured group health insurance	<i>Texas Department of Insurance</i> (800) 252-3439 (in-state only) (512) 463-6464 http://www.tdi.state.tx.us
Self-insured group health plans COBRA continuation coverage Family and Medical Leave Act	<i>U.S. Department of Labor, Dallas Regional Office</i> (214) 767-6831, or contact <i>U.S. Department of Labor, Division of Technical Assistance and Inquiries, Washington, D.C.</i> (202) 219-8776 <i>For Department of Labor publications:</i> (800) 998-7542 http://www.dol.gov/dol/pwba
Texas Health Insurance Risk Pool (Health Pool)	<i>Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Texas (plan administrator)</i> (888) 398-3927 (800) 735-2986 (TDD) http://www.txhealthpool.com
Medicaid	<i>Texas Department of Human Services</i> (800) 448-3927 http://www.dhs.state.tx.us
Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)	<i>Texas Department of Health</i> (800) 647-6558 http://www.texcarepartnership.com

Finally, if you would like to obtain a consumer guide for a different state, visit the web at <http://www.healthinsuranceinfo.net>

HELPFUL TERMS

Affiliation Period. The time an HMO may require you to wait after you enroll and before your coverage begins. HMOs that impose an affiliation period cannot exclude coverage of pre-existing conditions. Premiums cannot be charged during HMO affiliation periods. See also HMO.

Certificate of Creditable Coverage. A document provided by your health plan that lets you prove you had coverage under that health plan. Certificates of creditable coverage will usually be provided automatically when you leave a health plan. You can obtain certificates at other times as well. See also Creditable Coverage.

Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). CHIP is a program that provides health coverage to some children from low income families.

COBRA. Stands for the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, a federal law in effect since 1986. COBRA permits you and your dependents to continue in your employer's group health plan after your job ends. If your employer has 20 or more employees, you may be eligible for COBRA continuation coverage when you retire, quit, are fired, or work reduced hours. Continuation coverage also extends to surviving, divorced or separated spouses; dependent children; and children who lose their dependent status under their parent's health plan's rules. You may choose to continue in the group health plan for a limited time and pay the full premium (including the share your employer used to pay on your behalf plus a 2% administrative charge). COBRA continuation coverage generally lasts 18 months, or 36 months for dependents in certain circumstances.

Continuous Coverage. Health coverage that is not interrupted by a break of 63 or more consecutive days. Employer waiting periods and HMO affiliation periods do not count as gaps in health coverage for the purpose of determining if coverage is continuous. See also Creditable Coverage, Federally Eligible.

Creditable Coverage. Health insurance coverage under any of the following: a group health plan; an individual health plan; Medicare; Medicaid; CHAMPUS and TRICARE (health coverage for military personnel, retirees, and dependents); the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program; Indian Health Service; the Peace Corps; or a state health insurance risk pool. See also Continuous Coverage, Group Health Plan, Individual Health Plan.

Elimination Rider. An amendment permitted in an individual health plan issued by an insurer that permanently excludes health coverage for a health condition, body part, or body system.

Enrollment Period. The period during which all employees and their dependents can sign up for coverage under an employer group health plan. Besides permitting workers to elect health coverage when first hired, many employers and group health insurers hold an annual enrollment period, during which all employees can enroll in or change their health coverage. Texas requires all fully insured group health plans to hold an annual open enrollment period. See also Fully Insured Group Health Plan, Special Enrollment Period.

Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). A federal law that guarantees up to 12 weeks of job-protected leave for certain employees when they need to take time off due to serious illness, to have or adopt a child, or to care for another family member. When you qualify for leave under FMLA, you can continue coverage under your group health plan.

Federally Eligible. Status you attain once you have had 18 months of continuous creditable health coverage. To be federally eligible, you also must have used up any COBRA or state continuation coverage; you must not be eligible for Medicare or Medicaid; you must not have other health coverage; and you must apply for individual health coverage within 63 days of losing your prior creditable coverage. No matter where you live in the U.S., if you are federally eligible you must be offered at least some type of individual health plan with no pre-existing condition exclusion periods. See also Texas Health Insurance Risk Pool, COBRA, Continuous Coverage, Creditable Coverage.

Fully Insured Group Health Plan. Health insurance purchased by an employer from an insurer or HMO. Fully insured group health plans are regulated by Texas. See also Self-Insured Group Health Plans.

Genetic Information. Includes information about family history or genetic test results indicating your risk of developing a health condition. Group and individual health plans cannot consider pre-existing (and therefore exclude coverage for) a condition about which you have genetic information, unless that health condition has been diagnosed by a health professional.

Group Health Plan. Health insurance (usually sponsored by an employer, union or professional association) that covers at least 2 employees. See also Fully Insured Group Health Plan, Self-Insured Group Health Plan.

Guaranteed Issue. A requirement that health plans must permit you to enroll regardless of your health status, age, gender, or other factors that might predict your use of health services. All health plans sold to small employers with 2 to 50 employees in Texas are guaranteed issue.

Guaranteed Renewability. A feature in health plans that means your coverage cannot be canceled because you get sick. HIPAA requires all health plans to be guaranteed renewable. Your coverage can be canceled for other reasons unrelated to your health status.

Health Insurance or Health Plan. In this guide, the term means benefits consisting of medical care (provided directly or through insurance or reimbursement) under any hospital or medical service policy, plan contract, or HMO contract offered by a health insurance company or a group health plan. It does not mean coverage that is limited to accident or disability insurance, workers' compensation insurance, liability insurance (including automobile insurance) for medical expenses, or coverage for on-site medical clinics. Health insurance also does not mean coverage for limited dental or vision benefits to the extent these are provided under a separate policy.

Health Plan Year. That calendar period during which your health plan coverage is in effect. Many group health plan years begin on January 1, while others begin in a different month.

Health Status. When used in this guide, refers to your medical condition (both physical and mental illnesses), claims experience, receipt of health care, medical history, genetic information, evidence of insurability (including conditions arising out of acts of domestic violence), and disability. See also Genetic Information.

HIPAA. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, sometimes known as Kassebaum-Kennedy, after the two senators who spearheaded the bill. Passed in 1996 to help people buy and keep health coverage, even when they have serious health conditions, the law sets a national floor for health coverage reforms. Since states can and have modified and expanded upon these provisions, consumers' protections vary from state to state.

HMO. Health maintenance organization. A kind of health plan. HMOs usually limit coverage to care from doctors who work for or contract with the HMO. They generally do not require deductibles, but often do charge a small fee, called a copayment, for services like doctor visits or prescriptions. If you are covered under an HMO, the HMO might require an affiliation period before coverage begins. See also Affiliation Period.

Individual Health Plan. Policies for people not connected to an employer group. This term also refers to coverage purchased by self-employed persons who have no other employees. Individual health plans are regulated by Texas.

Insurer. Another term for insurance company. This term does not include HMOs.

Kassebaum-Kennedy. See HIPAA.

Large Group Health Plan. One with more than 50 eligible employees.

Late Enrollment. Enrollment in a health plan at a time other than the regular or a special enrollment period. Texas requires fully insured group plans to cover you if you are a late enrollee, although you may have to wait for the next open enrollment period. Late enrollees can be subject to a longer pre-existing condition exclusion period. See also Special Enrollment Period.

Look Back. The maximum length of time, immediately prior to enrolling in a health plan, that can be examined for evidence of pre-existing conditions. See also Pre-existing Condition.

Medicaid. A program providing comprehensive health insurance coverage and other assistance to certain low-income Texas residents. All other states have Medicaid programs, too, though eligibility levels and covered benefits will vary.

Nondiscrimination. A requirement that group health plans not discriminate against you based on your health status. Your coverage under a group health plan cannot be denied or restricted, nor can you be charged a higher premium, because of your health status. Group health plans can restrict your coverage based on other factors (such as part time employment) that are unrelated to health status. See also Group Health Plan, Health Status.

Pre-existing Condition (Group Health Insurance). Any condition (either physical or mental) for which medical advice, diagnosis, care, or treatment was recommended or received within the 6-month period immediately preceding enrollment in a health plan. Pregnancy cannot be counted as a pre-existing condition. Genetic information about your likelihood of developing a disease or condition, without a diagnosis of that disease or condition, cannot be considered a pre-existing condition. Newborns, newly adopted children, and children placed for adoption covered within 31 days cannot be subject to pre-existing condition exclusions.

Pre-existing Condition (Health Pool). Any condition for which medical advice, diagnosis, care or treatment was recommended or received within the 6-month period immediately preceding enrollment in a health plan. Pregnancy can be counted as a pre-existing condition by the Health Pool.

Pre-existing Condition (Individual Health Insurance). Any symptoms for which medical advice, diagnosis, care or treatment was ever recommended or received, or for which an ordinarily prudent person would have sought medical advice, care or treatment within a 5-year period preceding enrollment. In Texas, under individual health plans, pregnancy can be counted as a pre-existing condition. See also Prudent Person Rule.

Pre-existing Condition Exclusion Period. The time during which a health plan will not pay for covered care relating to a pre-existing condition. See also Pre-existing Condition.

Prudent Person Rule. In individual health plans only, a rule that permits insurers to exclude as pre-existing any condition for which – in the insurer’s judgment – most people would have sought care or treatment.

Self-Insured Group Health Plans. Plans set up by employers who set aside funds to pay their employees' health claims. Because employers often hire insurers or HMOs to run these plans, they may look to you just like fully insured plans. Employers must disclose in your benefits information whether an insurer is responsible for funding, or for only administering the plan. If the insurer is only administering the plan, it is self-insured. Self-insured plans are regulated by the U.S. Department of Labor, not by Texas.

Small Group Health Plans. Plans with at least 2 but not more than 50 employees.

Special Enrollment Period. A time, triggered by certain specific events, during which you and your dependents must be permitted to sign up for coverage under a group health plan. Employers and group health insurers must make such a period available to employees and their dependents when their family status changes or when their health coverage status changes. Special enrollment periods must last at least 30 days. Enrollment in a health plan during a special enrollment period is not considered late enrollment. See also Late Enrollment.

State Continuation Coverage. A program required to be offered by insurers and HMOs for former employees of small employers as well as some other groups of people. Continuation coverage allows people to keep their group health insurance for a limited time. See also COBRA.

Supplemental Security Income (SSI). A program providing cash benefits to certain very low income disabled and elderly individuals. When you qualify for SSI, you generally also qualify for Medicaid. In addition, Medicaid coverage often continues for a limited time if your income increases so that you no longer qualify for SSI.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). A program (also known as Texas Works and Choices) that provides cash benefits to low income families with children. When you qualify for TANF, you generally also qualify for Medicaid. In addition, Medicaid coverage often continues for a limited time or longer if you no longer qualify for TANF. See also Medicaid.

Texas Health Insurance Risk Pool. Also called the "Health Pool," the state-run program that provides health coverage for federally eligible persons and for people with high health risks (called a high risk pool).

U.S. Department of Labor. A department of the federal government that regulates employer provided health benefit plans. You may need to contact the Department of Labor if you are in a self-insured group health plan, or if you have questions about COBRA or the Family and Medical Leave Act. See also COBRA, Family and Medical Leave Act.

Waiting Period. The time you may be required to work for an employer before you are eligible for health coverage. Not all employers require waiting periods. Waiting periods do not count as gaps in health coverage for purposes of determining whether coverage is continuous. If your employer requires a waiting period, your pre-existing condition exclusion period begins on the first day of the waiting period. See also Pre-existing Condition Exclusion Period.