

The 2026 Health Coverage Buyer's Guide

Choosing health coverage in 2025 is overwhelming for most families and self-employed individuals. Rates are rising, networks are narrowing, and there are more plan types than ever before. This guide breaks everything down simply so you can make a confident, informed choice — without the confusion.

Understanding the Main Types of Plan

PPO — Preferred Provider Organization

- Best choice for people who want flexibility.
- Allows you to see specialists without referrals.
- Typically lower out-of-pocket costs when using in-network doctors.
- Ideal for travelers, entrepreneurs, and families who value choice.

HMO — Health Maintenance Organization

- Requires referrals for specialists.
- Usually local networks only.
- Lower premiums but more restrictions.
- Best for people who never travel and want bare-minimum cost.

EPO — Exclusive Provider Organization

- Combination of PPO and HMO.
- NO out-of-network benefits except emergencies.
- Good rates, poor flexibility.

ACA Marketplace Plans

- No medical questions — guaranteed issue.
- Rates determined by age, zip, household size, income.
- Strong option for pre-existing conditions.

Medically Underwritten Private PPO

- Designed for healthy individuals and families.
- Higher-quality networks, better benefits.
- Requires health questions.

Key Terms Explained

- Deductible — What you pay before insurance helps.
- Coinsurance — Your percentage after deductible.
- Out-of-Pocket Max — The most you can spend in a year.
- Copays — Flat fees for doctor visits.
- Network — The doctors/hospitals your plan works with.

Comparing Plans: What Actually Matters

- Network strength (can you see quality doctors?)
- Total yearly cost (premium + out-of-pocket estimate)
- Medication coverage
- Specialist access
- Emergency & hospital benefits
- Doctor availability in YOUR zip code

Red Flags to Avoid

- Narrow networks disguised as PPOs
- Celebrity branding with poor benefits
- High deductibles and no copays
- Plans with no caps on out-of-pocket exposure
- Telemed-only coverage presented as “full insurance”

Your Advisor's Checklist

- Does this network cover the specialists I want?
- What EXACTLY is my out-of-pocket max?
- What happens if I travel out of state?
- Are my medications covered?
- If it's cheap, what's missing?
