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[Home](#) / [lifestyles](#) / [health_med_fit](#) /

Virginia Health Information provides health care price database

By **Tammie Smith**

Virginia Health Information is trying to unravel some of the mystery around medical costs.

The nonprofit organization, which has a contract to collect and report state health data, has updated an online health care prices database.

It reports average amounts insurance companies allow for 30 common medical procedures, such as abdominal ultrasound and hip replacement.

"What's unique this year is that with the help of health insurance companies, consumers can see more detailed pricing information, about specific health care procedures," said Michael Lundberg, the organization's executive director.

"The new information includes variations in price by where the procedure takes place and a breakdown of possible charges for facility, surgeon, anesthesiologist, radiologist, physician and other charges. This information can help consumers better understand what they may pay and to negotiate lower prices for care," Lundberg said.

Consumers can get a sense, for instance, of the cost of a colonoscopy, a test that screens for colon cancer, based on whether it's done in a doctor's office, surgery center or hospital outpatient unit. The new data also breaks down the cost by fees for doctor, facility, anesthesia and other charges.

The cost of a breast biopsy, a test to obtain a sample of tissue from a suspicious area in the breast, varies more than \$1,000 by type of facility.

The database has several limitations. Consumers who don't have insurance and who self-pay may not get as much of a discount as insurer-allowed amounts.

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