

PRIMARY CARE INVESTMENT STRATEGIES: EVIDENCE SNAPSHOT

Health Coaches in Primary Care Settings

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Background

Trained health coaches provide advice and guidance to individuals about their health or health decisions. Health coaching includes health education and health promotion to enhance individual wellbeing and support patients to achieve their health-related goals.¹ Health coaches have a variety of personal, educational, and professional backgrounds and may work as private trainers, nurses or other licensed clinicians, or community health workers.² Health coaches leave clinical decision-making to physicians, while supporting patients with chronic disease management and adherence to treatment regimes.³ Although there are efforts to establish a national certification program for health coaches, no system currently exists.²

Quality Implications

Health coaches improve the patient-provider relationship and enhance continuity of care.

- A collection of structured surveys and in-depth interviews with clinicians found that patients with health coaches were more engaged in care plans and showed improved self-management skills associated with the use of coaches. Clinician satisfaction with the length and quality of patient visits was higher for visits where patients used health coaches compared to visits without.³
- A randomized control trial studying 12 months of health coaching compared to standard care plans for low-income populations found that the use of health coaches increased patient trust in primary care providers.⁴
- An observational study evaluating the referral process and effectiveness of unlicensed health coaches for patients with diabetes or hypertension found that when physicians referred patients to a health coach, the doctors believed that the extra assistance benefited patients, improved care coordination, and reduced their workload. However, physicians were skeptical that coaches would be able to help patients with more complex needs.⁵

Health coaches improve the management of chronic health conditions.

- A literature review studying the effect of health coaches on chronic disease management found that coaches improve patients' behavioral outcomes such as weight management and increased levels of exercise; psychological outcomes including performance on mental health and self-efficacy assessments; and physiological conditions such as blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and severity of dyspnea.⁶
- An evaluation of two programs that trained home health aides to be health coaches and matched them with chronically ill patients receiving home care found significant improvements in self-care abilities and several quality of life metrics.⁷
- Participants in a weight loss program that included assistance from a professional health coach experienced significantly more weight loss success than those who had peer or mentor support.⁸

Cost Implications

Health coaches do not generate system-wide or individual practice cost savings in the short-term, but there may be potential for long-term savings.

- A literature review of 67 articles studying the use of health coaches for the management of chronic disease reported a lack of conclusive evidence that health coaches can lower system costs in the short-term. Some studies attributed this to a lack of impact on high cost utilization, such as hospital admissions or hospital length of stay.⁹ Many studies suggested that health coaches could lead to long-term savings, by improving health outcomes associated with chronic diseases, such as reductions in blood pressure and hemoglobin levels. Another study agreed that health coaches may lead to system-wide savings but warned that they could also increase use of appropriate preventive care, therefore limiting the overall reduction in health care expenditures.¹⁰
- Another study found that employing health coaches to assist patients with all aspects of disease management cost \$483 per patient per year but did not lead to a reduction in annual health care costs compared to a control group. On average, coaches in this study managed a 40 to 60 patient panel and spent nine hours per year with each patient. Some coaches spent as many as 30 hours with individual patients who may have had complex needs.¹⁰
- Health coaches may be advantageous for physician practice revenues. A study of the impact of nurses acting as health coaches at a primary care practice found that when the coaches assisted with diabetes treatment regimes, the practice saw an increase in diabetes-related office visits and tests that increased office revenue while also aligning patients with recommended disease management standards. The program cost the practice \$3,781 in its first year but returned a profit of \$36,905 in year two.¹¹

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