



## **SIX TIPS FOR SMART POPULATION HEALTH MEASUREMENT**

# Six Tips for Smart Population Health Measurement

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Your company can no longer ignore the relationship between health, productivity and your bottom line. In order to build a successful population health program, it is imperative that your business understand how to take advantage of all the data at hand – data from insurance claims, health questionnaires and biometric screenings.

**Health management starts with measurement.** Once you understand this data, you can execute a strong, data driven health strategy. The following six tips will help your company make the best use of your population health data.

## 1. Know the difference between health care utilization and health

While health care claims are undeniably a useful source of population health data, they are only a proxy measure of health status. Cost sharing arrangements (e.g. co-pays, deductibles, out-of-pocket maximums, tiered-pricing, and out-of-network premiums) powerfully shape the demand for health care services independently of health status and should be taken into consideration when using claims data as a measure of population health. This is particularly important when using claims data to compare either two different populations or when comparing one population at two different points in time. Employers interested in tracking changes in population health over time should be aware of any changes in the health benefit plan that could have affected utilization.

## 2. Understand how illness policies and turnover affect absence and productivity

The more paid-time-off days that are available to employees, the more absenteeism there will be regardless of health status. This is true whether the paid-time-off is covered by a unified PTO policy or separate vacation and sick leave banks. Valid comparison between populations or points in time of illness-related absence rates must take into consideration any differences in PTO policies between the compared populations or points in time. High employee turnover rates are associated with higher absenteeism, so comparisons of illness-related absence rates should also include turnover rate if that information is available.

### 3. Gather several years of baseline data before assessing trends

Assessing the evidence of meaningful trends in utilization data requires an understanding of the magnitude of normal variation that can be expected. That is, you need to understand how to differentiate the signal from the noise. It may take several years of data to establish a good baseline for measurement. Baseline data is also useful for spotting existing trends in outcome measures (secular trends) that predate interventions intended to affect the outcomes of interest.

### 4. Use appropriate analytic techniques for program evaluation

Program evaluations using a before and after analysis require at a minimum a certain amount of baseline data. Evaluations that depend on comparing participants to non-participants should make use of propensity matching or other techniques to control for confounding factors that may influence the outcomes of interest. Additionally, special techniques are needed when evaluating utilization trends of cohorts identified by extreme utilization measures—such as very high or very low costs—to avoid misinterpretation of results affected by regression to the mean.

### 5. Optimize health questionnaires for measurement

Many health questionnaires are designed to promote health awareness rather than gather data. While there is nothing wrong with using a questionnaire format to promote personal health awareness, such questionnaires are poor choices for population health measurement because of their length and breadth of topics. An ideal survey instrument places a minimal burden on respondents while maximizing the amount of useful data gathered. For businesses, it is useful to have measures of:

- Overall population health such as self-perceived health status and overall well-being
- Risk factors such as physical inactivity, substance abuse, psychological stress, and poor nutrition
- Illness-related productivity losses in the form of absenteeism and attending work while sick

Because they are often voluntary, a major weakness of health questionnaires is they typically achieve low response rates. A low response rate limits the validity and representativeness of the results. To improve response rates, companies should strive to make questionnaires as easy to complete as possible. Employers should provide clear information about how the data is helpful to the company and employees and how personal information is safeguarded. Small, non-coercive incentives may be effective in improving response rates. Additionally, employers may consider using systematic or random sampling techniques to improve the representativeness of the aggregated questionnaire results.

If an employer has access to aggregated claims data, the marginal value of collecting self-reported medical conditions on a health questionnaire may not be worth the added respondent burden. Instead, it may be of greater utility to gather data on interest level in health promotion or illness management. Surveying on interest level in health programs should be open to the entire population and not sampled.

## **6. Match biometric screening results with claims and questionnaire data**

Biometric screening usually involves measuring height, weight, waist circumference, blood pressure, and also drawing blood samples for cholesterol and blood sugar. As is true of health questionnaires, the results of voluntary biometric screening may not be representative of the population as a whole. People naturally resist getting measured on aspects of personal health that they are actively seeking to ignore or have no interest in addressing. The real value in voluntary biometric screening is not in establishing population prevalence, but in providing feedback to those who are motivated to act on the results. As a side benefit, if biometric screening results can be person-matched to claims and questionnaire data, it is possible to identify persons who may benefit from disease management or wellness programs.

Data without proper interpretation is simply noise. By using these six tips in your approach a data-driven health strategy, you can eliminate noise and find the true measure of your population health.

### **About Healthentic**

Healthentic diagnoses and prescribes population health solutions so employers can target the right issues and people to make improvements. Our Population Health Dashboard (PhD) combines all of your health care data inputs into one place, giving you the industry's easiest to use population health measurement platform. Finally, you can focus on answering the questions that matter.

Learn more by visiting our website at <http://www.healthentic.com>