

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

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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 Health Policy Institute 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 ALABAMA

As an Alabama 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 an Alabama resident. Chapter 1 gives an overview of your protections. Chapters 2 and 3 explain your protections under group health plans and individual health insurance. 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 Alabama, 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 31. For information about how to find consumer guides for other states on the Internet, see page 31. A list of helpful terms and their definitions begins on page 32. 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 insurance**), so your protections may vary if you leave Alabama. 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 an Alabama resident.

### HOW AM I PROTECTED?

In Alabama, 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 6).*
- *All group health plans in Alabama must limit exclusion of pre-existing conditions. There are rules about when a pre-existing condition exclusion period can be applied 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 8).*
- *Your health insurance cannot be canceled because you get sick. Most health insurance is **guaranteed renewable** (see pages 14 and 22).*
- *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** coverage. It can help when you are between jobs or waiting for a new health plan to cover your pre-existing condition. There are limits on what you can be charged for this coverage (see page 15).*
- *If you lose your group health insurance and meet other qualifications, you will be **HIPAA eligible**. If so, you can buy an individual health insurance policy from the*

**Alabama Health Insurance Plan (AHIP).** You will not face a new pre-existing condition exclusion period. There are limits on what you can be charged for an AHIP policy (see page 20).

- *If you are a small employer buying a 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 health plans for small employers must be sold on a **guaranteed issue** basis (see page 22).*
- *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 Alabama **Medicaid** program offers free health coverage for pregnant women, families with children, elderly and disabled individuals with very low incomes (see page 24).*
- *If your children are 18 years old or younger, do not have health insurance and meet other qualifications, you may be able to buy insurance for them through **ALL Kids, the state children's health insurance plan**. (see page 26).*
- *If you believe you may be at risk for cancer but are uninsured or underinsured, you may be eligible for free screening and treatment. The **Alabama Breast and Cervical Cancer Treatment Program** provides free cancer screening for qualified female residents. Some women diagnosed with breast or cervical cancer through this program may be eligible for medical care through the Alabama Medicaid Program (see page 27).*
- *If you have lost your health insurance and are receiving benefits from the **Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) Program**, you may be eligible for a federal income tax credit to help you pay for new health coverage. This credit is called the **Health Coverage Tax Credit (HCTC)**, and is equal to 65% of the cost of qualified coverage, including COBRA and a policy offered by BlueCross BlueShield of Alabama (see page 29).*
- *If you are a retiree aged 55-65 and receiving benefits from **Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation (PBGC)**, then you may be eligible for the HCTC (see page 29).*

## 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 health benefits with you. Except when you exercise your federal COBRA 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 the same doctors that your old plan did (see page 7).*
- *If you change jobs, your new employer may not offer you health benefits. Employers are required only to make sure that any health benefits they do offer do not discriminate based on health status (see page 7).*
- *If you get a new job with health benefits, your coverage may not start right away. Employers can require **waiting periods** before your health benefits begin. Health maintenance organizations (**HMOs**) can require **affiliation periods** (see page 7).*
- *If you have a break in coverage of 63 days or more, you may have to satisfy a new pre-existing exclusion period when you join a new group health plan (see page 8).*
- *Even if you have **continuous coverage**, there may be a pre-existing condition exclusion period for some benefits if you join a group health plan that covers benefits your old 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 one year before your new health plan will pay for drugs prescribed to treat a pre-existing condition (see page 8).*
- *If you work for certain non-federal public employers in Alabama, not all of the group health plan protections may apply to you (see page 11).*
- *In Alabama, your access to individual health insurance may depend on your health status. Private insurers are not prohibited from turning you down, charging you more, or limiting coverage because of pre-existing conditions (see page 13).*
- *Once you obtain individual health insurance, your ability to switch plans may be limited as well. While you have protections when you move from an individual policy to a group plan, Alabama law does not protect you from the imposition of an **elimination rider** when you move from one individual plan to another, even if you had prior continuous coverage. Furthermore, you are not assured the right to buy another individual policy (see page 14).*
- *If you are HIPAA eligible, the Alabama Health Insurance Plan is your only guaranteed access to individual health insurance. However, if you are healthy, you may be able to buy individual health insurance from other insurance companies (see page 20).*

- *If you are a small employer buying a group health insurance policy, you can be charged more, within limits, based on health status, age, gender, and other factors of those in your group. Even with these limits, however, premiums can be significantly higher if someone in your group has a serious illness (see page 22).*
- *If you move away from Alabama, you may not be able to buy individual health insurance in another state unless you are HIPAA eligible. See <http://healthinsuranceinfo.net>.*

## CHAPTER 2

# YOUR PROTECTIONS UNDER GROUP HEALTH PLANS

This chapter describes 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?

- *In general, you have to be eligible for the group health plan.* For example, your employer may not give health benefits to all employees. Or, your employer may offer an HMO plan that you cannot join because you live outside of the plan's service area.
- *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. Employers may refuse or restrict coverage for other reasons (for example, if you work less than 30 hours per week or only on a temporary basis), as long as these are unrelated to health status and applied consistently.

#### 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 group health plan after certain events. You can elect coverage at 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 health insurance (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)

- *Under Alabama law, newborns are automatically covered under your fully insured small group health plan if the plan covers dependents.* Generally, the automatic period of coverage lasts for the first 31 days following the birth, however the length of this covered period may vary plan to plan. The insurer may require that the parent enroll the child within a certain number of days in order to continue coverage beyond the automatic period of coverage.
- *Your disabled child can remain covered under your fully insured small group health plan after he or she reaches the age at which dependent coverage usually terminates.* To qualify, your adult son or daughter must be medically certified as being disabled and dependent on you financially.
- *When you begin a new job, your employer may require a waiting period before you can sign up for health coverage.* These waiting periods, however, must be applied consistently and cannot vary due to your health status. You will not health insurance coverage during this time.
- *When you begin a new job with health insurance through an HMO, the HMO may require a waiting period before the coverage begins.* During this affiliation period, you will not health insurance coverage. The HMO also cannot impose any pre-existing condition exclusions if it imposes an affiliation period. An HMO affiliation period cannot exceed 2 months (3 months for late enrollees), and you cannot be charged a premium during this time.
- *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 at a company with 50 or more employees.

If you qualify for leave under the 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 health insurance 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 about 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.

- *A group health plan 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. This period is also called the **look back** period.*
- *Group health plans cannot apply a pre-existing condition exclusion period for pregnancy, newborns, newly adopted children, children placed for adoption, or genetic information.*
- *Group health plans can exclude coverage for pre-existing conditions only for a limited time. The maximum period is 12 months. However, if you enroll late in a group health plan (after you were hired and not during a regular or special enrollment period) you may have a pre-existing condition exclusion period up to 18 months.*
- *Group plans that impose pre-existing condition exclusion periods must give you credit for any previous continuous **creditable coverage** that you've had. Most types of insurance are considered to be creditable coverage.*

Coverage counts as continuous if it has not been interrupted by a break of 63 days or more days in a row.

### **What is creditable coverage?**

Most health insurance counts as creditable coverage, including:

Children's Health Insurance Program	Medicare
Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHBP)	Military health coverage (CHAMPUS, TRICARE)
Foreign National Coverage	State high-risk pools
Group health insurance (including COBRA)	Student Health Insurance
Indian Health Service	VA Coverage
Individual health insurance	
Medicaid	

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.

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, you can 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. HMOs that require an affiliation period cannot exclude coverage for pre-existing conditions.

### **What is continuous coverage?**

You are considered to have continuous coverage under one plan, or several plans, as long as you don't have a lapse of 63 or more days.

Take Art, who has diabetes. Ajax Company covered him under its group health plan for 9 months, but he lost his job and health coverage. Then, 45 days later, Art found a new job at Beta Corporation and had health coverage for 9 more months. Art changed jobs again. His new company, Charter, has a health plan that covers care for diabetes but excludes pre-existing conditions for 12 months. Charter must cover Art's diabetes care immediately, because his 18 months of prior continuous coverage are credited against the 12-month exclusion.

Now consider a slightly different situation. Assume Art was uninsured for 90 days between his jobs at Ajax and Beta. In this case, Charter will credit coverage only under Beta's plan toward the 12-month pre-existing condition exclusion period. Charter's plan will begin paying for Art's diabetes care in 3 months (1 year minus 9 months). Art does not get credit for his coverage at Ajax since he had a break in coverage of 63 or more consecutive days.

- *Your protections may differ if you move to a group health plan that offers more benefits than your old one did.* Group health 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 group health plan may impose a pre-existing condition exclusion period for that category. Group health plans that use this method of crediting prior coverage must use it for everyone and must disclose this to you when you enroll.

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

Sue needs prescription medications 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 group health plan does cover prescription drugs. However, because her prior policy did not, the new plan refuses to cover her blood pressure medicine for 12 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 health insurance protections will not apply to their employees' group health plan.

In the past, few public employers in Alabama have decided that certain health insurance protections will not apply to their employees. The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) used to post a list of employers that had elected to exempt, however it has removed this information from its web site.

If you are not sure about your protections under your public employee health plan, you should contact your employer. In addition, you can contact CMS directly at (877) 267-2323 ext. 61565 or at (410) 786-1565 to see if your employer has elected to be exempt from certain protection.

## **AS YOU ARE LEAVING GROUP COVERAGE...**

- *If you are leaving your job or otherwise losing access to your group health plan, 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 and high-risk pool coverage.
- *If you have lost your group health insurance and are receiving benefits from the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program, you may be eligible for a federal income tax credit to help you pay for new health coverage.* This credit is called the Health Coverage Tax Credit (HCTC), and is equal to 65% of the cost of qualified health coverage (see page 29).

- *If you are a retiree aged 55-65 and receiving pension benefits from the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC), you may also be eligible for the HCTC (see page 29).*

## **CHAPTER 3**

# **YOUR PROTECTIONS WHEN BUYING INDIVIDUAL HEALTH INSURANCE**

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

### **INDIVIDUAL HEALTH INSURANCE SOLD BY PRIVATE INSURERS**

#### ***WHEN DO INDIVIDUAL HEALTH INSURERS HAVE TO SELL ME A POLICY?***

In Alabama, your ability to buy individual health insurance may depend on your health status.

- *In general, companies that sell individual health insurance in Alabama are free to turn you down because of your health status and other factors.* When applying for individual health insurance, you may be asked questions about health conditions you have now or had in the past. Depending on your health status, insurers might refuse to sell you coverage or offer to sell you a policy that has special limitations on what it covers.
- *Under Alabama law, newborns are automatically covered under your fully insured health insurance plan, if the plan covers dependents.* Generally, the automatic period of coverage lasts for the first 31 days following the birth, however the length of this covered period may vary plan to plan. The insurer may require that the parent enroll the child within a certain number of days in order to continue coverage beyond the automatic period of coverage

#### ***WHAT WILL MY INDIVIDUAL HEALTH INSURANCE POLICY COVER?***

- *It depends on what you buy.* Alabama does not require health insurers in the individual market to sell standardized policies. Insurers can design different policies and you will have to read and compare them carefully. However, Alabama does require all insurers to cover certain benefits – such as post-delivery hospital stays and

breast cancer screening. Check with the Alabama Department of Insurance for more information about mandated benefits.

### ***WHAT ABOUT COVERAGE FOR MY PRE-EXISTING CONDITION?***

- *Individual health insurers can impose elimination riders.* This is an amendment to your health insurance policy that permanently excludes coverage for a health condition or even an entire body part or system.
- *Individual insurers can also impose pre-existing condition exclusion periods.* In Alabama, an individual market insurer can apply a pre-existing condition exclusion period for up to 24 months.

The definition of pre-existing condition is different under individual health insurance than under group health plans. Individual health insurance can count as pre-existing any condition that was present within 5 years from the first day of coverage. In Alabama, pregnancy and non-cancer related genetic testing can count as a pre-existing condition.

- *If you make a claim during the first two years of coverage, the insurer can look back to see if the claim is for a condition that would have been considered a pre-existing condition.* If the insurer determines that the condition is a pre-existing condition, it can refuse to pay for expenses for that condition.
- *Unlike in the group market, you will not get credit towards your pre-existing condition exclusion period for any prior credible coverage you have between your old coverage and your new individual health insurance policy.*

### ***WHAT CAN I BE CHARGED FOR AN INDIVIDUAL HEALTH INSURANCE POLICY?***

- *Generally, in Alabama, there are no limits on how much individual premiums can vary due to age, gender, health status, family size, and other factors.*
- *When you renew your individual health insurance policy, your premiums can increase based on certain factors, such as your age.*

## ***CAN MY INDIVIDUAL HEALTH INSURANCE POLICY BE CANCELLED?***

- *Your 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 managed care plans, continue to live in the plan service area.
- *Some insurance companies sell temporary health insurance policies.* Temporary policies are not guaranteed renewable. They will only cover you for a limited time, such as 6 months. If you want to renew coverage under a temporary policy after it expires, you will have to apply for a new contract. There is no guarantee that coverage will be re-issued at all or at the same price.

## **COBRA CONTINUATION COVERAGE**

### ***WHEN DO I HAVE TO BE OFFERED COBRA COVERAGE?***

If you are leaving your job and you had group coverage, you may be able to stay in your group plan for an extended time through COBRA coverage. The information presented below was taken from publications prepared by the U.S. Department of Labor. You should contact them 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**.

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.

## 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

- *Each person who is eligible for COBRA continuation can make his or her 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 HIPAA eligible, you must choose and use up any COBRA available to you.*

## **SPECIAL SECOND CHANCE TO ELECT COBRA FOR TRADE-DISLOCATED WORKERS**

- *A second COBRA election period may be available for TAA eligible people who did not elect cobra when it was first offered. The second election period can be exercised 60 days from the 1st day of TAA eligibility, but in no case later than 6 months following loss of coverage. Coverage elected during this second election begins retroactive to the beginning of the special election period – not back to qualifying event.*
- *Certain people who lost their job-based health coverage because of the impact of imports on their employers have a limited second chance to elect COBRA. People who are receiving benefits from the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) Program are eligible for a federal income tax credit (the Health Coverage Tax Credit, or HCTC) that will pay 65% of their premiums.*
- *For some laid off workers, TAA benefits begin after their 60-day period to elect COBRA continuation coverage has expired. In this circumstance, TAA-eligible people have a second 60-day period, starting on the date of their TAA eligibility, to elect COBRA. (However, in no case can COBRA be elected more than 6-months following the original qualifying event (i.e. layoff) that caused the loss of group health plan coverage.)*
- *When COBRA is elected during this special, second election period, coverage starts on the first date of the special election period. Any time that has elapsed between the original qualifying event and the first date of the special election period is not counted as a lapse in coverage in determining continuous coverage history.*

### **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.*
- *If you lost your group health insurance and are receiving benefits from the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) Program, you may be eligible for a federal income tax credit to help you pay for COBRA coverage. This credit is called the Health Coverage Tax Credit (HCTC), and is equal to 65% of the cost of qualified coverage, including COBRA (see page 29).*
- *If you are a retiree aged 55-65 and receiving benefits from Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC), you may be eligible for the HCTC (see page 29).*

### **HOW LONG DOES COBRA COVERAGE LAST?**

- *COBRA coverage generally lasts up to 18 months and cannot be renewed. However, are sometimes eligible for up to 36 months of COBRA continuation coverage, depending on their qualifying event. In addition, special rules for disabled individuals may extend the maximum period of coverage to 29 months. To qualify for the disability extension, you must have been disabled at the time of your COBRA qualifying event (such as termination of employment or reduction in hours) or be determined to have become disabled within 60 days of that qualifying event. You must obtain this disability determination from the Social Security Administration, and you must notify your group health plan within 60 days of this disability determination.*

## LENGTH OF COBRA COVERAGE

<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

\*Special rules may extend coverage an additional 11 months for certain disabled individuals and their family members. .

- *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.*

## ALABAMA HEALTH INSURANCE PLAN (AHIP)

Alabama maintains a high-risk pool, called the Alabama Health Insurance Plan (AHIP). AHIP provides health insurance coverage only to HIPAA eligible persons.

### **WHEN CAN I GET HEALTH INSURANCE FROM THE AHIP?**

- *If you are HIPAA eligible, you can buy health insurance from AHIP. If you are not HIPAA eligible, you are not eligible for the AHIP.*

#### **To be HIPAA eligible, you must meet certain criteria**

No matter where you live, if you are HIPAA eligible you are guaranteed the right to buy an individual health plan with no pre-existing condition exclusion periods. In Alabama, you are guaranteed the right to buy coverage only from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama. To be HIPAA 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 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 HIPAA eligible.)
- You must apply for health insurance for which you are HIPAA eligible within 63 days of losing your prior coverage.

HIPAA 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 HIPAA eligible again by maintaining continuous coverage and rejoining a group health plan.

- *AHIP offers both an individual person policy and a policy for individuals with dependent children. However, if you have a spouse that is also HIPAA eligible, they cannot be included on your policy and will have to purchase their own AHIP policy.*

### **WHAT WILL HEALTH INSURANCE FROM AHIP COVER?**

- *As of January 2008, AHIP offers a choice of two plan options. If eligible for AHIP, you can buy either the Managed Care Plan, administered by United Health Care or the Traditional Indemnity Plan, administered by BlueCross BlueShield of Alabama.*

Although both plans cover similar benefits and services, your choice of providers and the amount of cost sharing you will face will vary depending on which plan you buy.

Generally, the Managed Health Plan limits your out-of-pocket costs for covered care but requires you to get services only from a list of in-network doctors, hospitals, and other providers. Under the Traditional Indemnity Plan, you will be able to get care from a broader list of providers, including out of network providers, but the plan requires higher cost sharing on your part.

- *Benefits may vary depending on the type of plan you buy.* Benefits are generally similar for both the Managed Care Plan and Traditional Indemnity Plan though there are some important differences. For example, under the Managed Care Plan, the prescription drug benefit is capped at \$10,000, whereas there is no prescription drug benefit limit under the Traditional Indemnity Plan.

Also, lifetime limits vary depending on the plan you choose. The Managed Care Plan has no lifetime limit, while the Traditional Indemnity Plan has a lifetime maximum of \$1 million.

- *Cost-sharing varies depending on the type of plan you buy.* Generally, cost sharing under the Managed Care Plan is more predictable than under the Traditional Indemnity Plan.

Under the Managed Care Plan, enrollees do not have to meet a deductible before the insurer starts paying for care. In addition, they will not be required to pay co-insurance for services. However, for most services, you will have to pay a significant co-pay, ranging from \$50 to \$500.

Under the Traditional Indemnity Plan, for most services, enrollees must meet an annual deductible of \$1,000 or \$2,500 before the insurer will pay. For some services, such as inpatient hospital care, separate deductible applies. In addition, for most services, enrollees must pay co-insurance (called a co-pay under the plan), which is generally 20% of the covered expense but may be higher depending on the benefit. For example, the co-pay for outpatient mental health services is 50% of the covered expense. Finally, co-pays can be much higher for services provided by out-of-network providers.

- *For a full description of covered benefits, contact AHIP directly at (334)-352-8924 or visit them on the web for a summary description of each plan at <http://www.alseib.org/healthinsurance/ahip/>.*

#### **WHAT ABOUT COVERAGE FOR MY PRE-EXISTING CONDITION?**

- *If you are eligible for AHIP, you will not face a pre-existing exclusion period.*

#### **WHAT CAN I BE CHARGED FOR HEALTH INSURANCE FROM AHIP?**

- *Premiums vary depending on the coverage option you choose, your age and gender, and whether you smoke. For example, as of January 1, 2008, for the indemnity plan with a \$1,000 deductible, the monthly premium is \$273 for a 25-year-old male non-smoker and \$908 per month for a 64-year-old non-smoker. Generally, premiums for the higher deductible indemnity plan are less expensive than the managed care plan, but enrollees face higher cost sharing. Premiums increase each year with your age and will adjust depending on your smoking status.*

#### **HOW LONG DOES HEALTH INSURANCE FROM AHIP LAST?**

- *AHIP policies are renewable as long as you pay your premiums, continue to reside in Alabama, and meet other eligibility requirements.*

## 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. Alabama 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 Alabama 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 insurance companies must sell you any **small group health plan policy** they sell to other small employers. However, they can require that a minimum percentage of your workers participate in your group health plan. Under Alabama law, insurers can required 100% participation rates for groups of 3 or less but no greater than 75% for groups of 4 or more. They can also require that you contribute to your workers' premiums. If you are buying a **large group health plan policy** for 51 or more employees, your group can be turned down.
- *Your insurance 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 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 insurance product. In the latter case, 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?

- *Alabama law limits how much small employers can be charged for health insurance.* Within limits, premiums for small group health insurance policies can vary based on the health status, age, gender, geography, and other characteristics of those in your group. Even within these limits, premiums can be significantly higher if someone in your group has a serious health condition. These limits apply to small employers in

Alabama with 2-50 eligible employees. For groups with more than 50 eligible employees, Alabama does not limit premium variation or increases. If you have questions about your group health insurance premiums, contact the Alabama Department of Insurance.

#### **WHAT IF I AM SELF-EMPLOYED?**

- *If you are self-employed with no other workers, you are not eligible to buy a group health insurance policy 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 insurance is protected by the laws that apply to individuals. (See Chapter 3.)*
- *If you are self-employed and buy your own health insurance, you are eligible to deduct 100% of the cost of your premium from your federal income tax.*

#### **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 Alabama Department of Insurance about your protections in association health plans.*

## CHAPTER 5

### FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Help is available to certain low-income residents of Alabama who cannot afford to buy health insurance. The Alabama Medicaid program and ALL Kids offer free or subsidized health insurance coverage, direct medical services or other help. In addition, the federal government, under Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) Program, provides tax credits to some workers who lose their jobs or whose work hours and wages are reduced as a result of increased imports. 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 Alabama residents. Medicaid covers families with children and pregnant women, 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. However, questions concerning immigration status and eligibility should be directed to the Alabama Department of Human Resources.

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

In Alabama you may be eligible for Medicaid if you are an infant, a child, a pregnant woman, or a parent of a 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 Alabama Medicaid for more information.

### Low income persons eligible for Medicaid in Alabama\*

<u>Category</u>	<u>Income eligibility</u> (as percent of federal poverty level)
Child 0-5	133%
Child 6-19	100%
Parent	
Working	26%
Non-Working	11%
Pregnant woman	133%

\* Eligibility information was compiled from *State Health Facts Online*, the Kaiser Family Foundation, 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 2008

<u>Size of Family Unit</u>	<u>Poverty Guideline</u> (annual income)
1	\$ 10,400
2	\$ 14,000
3	\$ 17,600

For larger families add \$3,600 for each additional person

So, for example, using this guideline, 133% of the federal poverty level for a family of 3 would be an annual income of \$23,408, or a monthly income of \$1,951.

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

- *Parents who receive benefits under **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)**, also know as **TANF Alabama Cash Assistance**, are automatically covered.* Parents should also know that when you get a job and your TANF benefits end, you generally can stay on Medicaid for a 12 month period.
- *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.

- *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 above 100% but 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 Alabama Medicaid 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 Alabama Medicaid. To obtain the locations and telephone number of branch offices near you, call (800) 362-1504 or go to <http://www.medicaid.state.al.us/>.

## ALL KIDS

ALL Kids is a state program that provides health insurance to low-income families with children under the age of 18 who are not eligible for Medicaid and are uninsured.

- *Your child must meet certain qualifications.* Your child must be a resident of Alabama, under the age of 19 years old and uninsured. In addition, your family income must be at or below 200% of FPL (or more in some circumstances). For a family of 3, this works out to an annual income of about \$35,200 or about \$2,934 per month.
- *If you voluntarily dropped health insurance to enroll your child into All Kids, they may face a 3-month waiting period.* There are many exceptions to this rule, such as , among other reasons, when you drop COBRA, Alabama Child Caring Program or individual health insurance. Be sure, before dropping other health coverage, to check with All Kids.
- *ALL Kids does not impose exclusions for pre-existing conditions.* If your child qualifies, as soon as their coverage starts they will be eligible for all covered benefits and services.

- *If your child qualifies, he or she will be eligible for comprehensive health insurance coverage. ALL Kids covers hospital and physician care, prescription drugs, immunizations, among other services.*
- *You may have to pay a small fee for your child to enroll in ALL Kids. Premiums are based on family size and income. As of January 2008, fees ranged between \$50 (low fee) to \$100 (fee) per year, per child, up to the first 3 children. If you have 4 or more children enrolled in ALL Kids, you only pay for the first 3 children. In addition, small co-pays are required for most services.*
- *For more information, call (888) 373-5437 or visit <http://www.adph.org/ALLKIDS/>.*

### **ALABAMA BREAST AND CERVICAL CANCER EARLY DETECTION PROGRAM (ABCCEDP)**

- *The Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program provides qualified women with breast and cervical cancer screening at no cost. Women who are screened and diagnosed through this program and diagnosed with breast and/or cervical cancer may be eligible for treatment through Medicaid.*
- *In order to be eligible for free screening for breast or cervical cancer through the program, you must meet certain requirements. Generally you must be a resident of Alabama, aged 40 to 64 or uninsured, at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, However, women under the age of 40 years with abnormal clinical breast exams may be allowed into the program and women who are 65 and older enrolled in Medicare Part A only. All eligible women receive a pelvic exam, pap smear, clinical breast exam, and mammogram.*
- *For more information about eligibility, contact the Alabama Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program at (877) 252-3324 or visit them online at <http://www.adph.org/earlydetection/Default.asp?id=546>.*

### **OTHER STATE PROGRAMS**

There may be other financial assistance programs available. Please contact the Alabama Department of Public Health at (334) 206-5200 or visit their website at <http://www.adph.org/>.

## **THE FEDERAL HEALTH COVERAGE TAX CREDIT (HCTC)**

A federal income tax credit is available to help certain trade dislocated workers and early retirees, and their dependents, buy qualified health insurance coverage. The Health Coverage Tax Credit (HCTC) covers 65% of the insurance premium for qualified coverage. Under this program, you can either claim the tax credit at the end of the year on your tax return or you can elect to have the money paid directly to your qualified health plan each month by the Internal Revenue Service.

### ***WHEN AM I ELIGIBLE FOR THE HCTC?***

- *To be eligible for the tax credit, you must be receiving Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) benefits or retirement benefits from the PBGC. If you are receiving PBGC benefits, you also must be at least 55 years old. In addition, you must not be enrolled in Medicare, Medicaid, or in other employer-sponsored coverage for which the employer contributes at least half of the premium.*
- *HCTC may apply to your family, too. If you are eligible, you can use the credit to help purchase qualified health coverage for your qualified family members. Qualified family members are your spouse and dependents that you can claim on your federal tax return. Family members are not eligible if they are enrolled in another group health plan where the employer pays at least 50% of the cost of coverage, or in Medicaid, SCHIP, FEHBP, Tricare/CHAMPUS.*
- *Eligibility for HCTC is not based on income. In addition, the HCTC is refundable. This means you can claim the credit even if you do not earn enough income to owe federal income tax.*

### ***HOW MUCH OF MY HEALTH COVERAGE PREMIUM WILL THE TAX CREDIT COVER?***

- *The HCTC is equal to 65% of health insurance premiums for qualified health insurance coverage.*

### ***WHAT HEALTH COVERAGE IS ELIGIBLE FOR THE TAX CREDIT?***

- *The HCTC can only be used to help pay for “qualified” health coverage. COBRA continuation coverage is considered qualified health coverage. (See Chapter 3 for*

more information about COBRA.) In addition, D.C. has designated a policy offered by CareFirst Blue Cross Blue Shield as a state qualified health plan.

### ***HOW DO I CLAIM THE HCTC?***

- *You can claim the HCTC on your tax return and be reimbursed for 65% of the premium you paid for qualified coverage while you were eligible for the HCTC. Currently, this is the only way to claim the HCTC if your qualified health plan is provided through a spouse's employer.*
- *Alternatively, you can choose to have your credit sent directly to your qualified health plan each month. To do this, you must register with the HCTC customer service center by calling 1-866-628-HCTC (1-866-628-4282), Monday through Friday between the hours of 7 am and 7 pm, Central time. TDD/TYY callers, please call 1-866-626-HCTC (1-866-626-4282).*

### ***WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?***

- *For more information about the HCTC, contact the HCTC customer service center at 1-866-628-HCTC, or see the IRS website at <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/index.html> (click on HCTC).*
- *For more information about TAA benefits contact, <http://www.doleta.gov/tradeact/>.*
- *For more information about PBGC, contact <http://www.pbgc.gov> or call 1-202-326-4000 with general inquiries.*

## 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.

<b>For questions about</b>	<b>Contact:</b>
Individual health insurance Fully insured group health insurance	<i>Alabama Insurance Department</i> (334) 269-3550 <a href="http://www.aldoi.org">http://www.aldoi.org</a>
Self-insured group health plans COBRA continuation coverage Family and Medical Leave Act	<i>U.S. Department of Labor, Employee Benefits Administrator Employee &amp; Employer Assistance Hotline and Publications:</i> (866) 444-EBSA (3272) <a href="http://www.dol.gov/ebsa/">http://www.dol.gov/ebsa/</a>
Alabama Health Insurance Plan (AHIP)	<i>Alabama Health Insurance Plan Administrator</i> (800) 513-1834 (in-state) (334) 352-8924 <a href="http://www.alseib.org/healthinsurance/ahip/">http://www.alseib.org/healthinsurance/ahip/</a>
Medicaid	<i>Alabama Medicaid agency</i> (800) 362-1504 (334) 242-5000 <a href="http://www.medicaid.state.al.us">http://www.medicaid.state.al.us</a>
ALL Kids	<i>Alabama Department of Public Health</i> (888) 373-5437 <a href="http://www.adph.org/allkids/">http://www.adph.org/allkids/</a>
Alabama Breast & Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (ABCCEDP)	<i>Alabama Department of Public Health</i> (877) 252-3324 <a href="http://www.adph.org/earlydetection/index.asp?ID=546">http://www.adph.org/earlydetection/index.asp?ID=546</a>
Federal Health Coverage Tax Credit (HCTC)	<i>Internal Revenue Service</i> 1-866-628-HCTC <a href="http://www.irs.gov/individuals/index.html">http://www.irs.gov/individuals/index.html</a>

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

## HELPFUL TERMS

***Alabama Breast and Cervical Cancer Treatment Program.*** Program which provides free screening for breast and cervical cancer to eligible Alabama residents. Eligible women diagnosed with breast or cervical cancer may be eligible for free coverage through Medicaid for treatment of their condition.

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

***Alabama Health Insurance Plan (AHIP).*** A state-run health insurance program for people who are HIPAA eligible.

***ALL Kids.*** A state-run health insurance program for children under the age of 19 whose families meet financial eligibility criteria. ALL Kids provides comprehensive benefits and has no pre-existing condition exclusions. Depending on your financial situation, ALL Kids may either be free or may have very modest cost-sharing requirements.

***Alternative Trade Adjustment Assistance (ATAA).*** ATAA is a benefit for workers at least 50 years old who have obtained different, full-time employment within 26 weeks of the termination of adversely-affected employment. These workers may receive 50% of the wage differential (up to \$10,000) during their 2 year eligibility period. To be eligible for the ATAA program, workers may not earn more than \$50,000 per year in their new employment. Also, the firm where the workers worked must meet certain eligibility criteria.

***Certificate of Creditable Coverage.*** A document provided by your health plan that lets you prove you had coverage under that 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.

***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 plan 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). COBRA continuation coverage generally lasts 18 months, or 36 months for dependents in certain circumstances.

***Continuous Coverage.*** Under federal rules, health insurance 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 insurance coverage for the purpose of determining if coverage is continuous. See also Creditable Coverage, HIPAA Eligible.

***Creditable Coverage.*** Health insurance coverage under any of the following: a group health plan; an individual health plan; Medicare; Medicaid; State Children's Health Insurance Program; CHAMPUS and TRICARE (health coverage for military personnel, retirees, and dependents); the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program; Indian Health Service; the Peace Corps; Public Health Plan (any established or maintained by a State, the U.S. government, a foreign country), or a state health insurance high risk pool. See also Continuous Coverage, Group Health Plan, Individual Health Insurance.

***Elimination Rider.*** An amendment permitted in individual health insurance policy contracts that permanently excludes your 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 benefits 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. See also 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 the FMLA, you can continue coverage under your group health plan.

***Fully Insured Group Health Plan.*** Health insurance purchased by an employer from an insurance company, an HMO, or a health care service plan. Fully insured health plans are regulated by Alabama. 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. 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 Alabama are guaranteed issue. Federally eligible persons are guaranteed issue of Alabama Health Insurance Plan coverage. Plans that are guaranteed issue can turn you away for other reasons.

***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 Coverage Tax Credit (HCTC).*** The Health Coverage Tax Credit (HCTC) is a program that can help pay for nearly two-thirds of eligible individuals' health plan premiums. In general, in order to be eligible for the tax credit, you must be 1) receiving Trade Readjustment Allowance (TRA) benefits or 2) will receive TRA benefits once your unemployment benefits are exhausted or 3) receiving benefits under the Alternative Trade Adjustment Assistance (ATAA) program or 4) aged 55 or older and receiving benefits from the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC).

***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 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 was passed in 1996 to help people buy and keep health insurance, even when they have serious health conditions, the law sets a national floor for health insurance reforms. Since states can and have modified and expanded upon these provisions, consumers' protections vary from state to state.

**HIPAA Eligible.** Status you attain once you have had 18 months of continuous creditable health coverage. To be HIPAA 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 insurance; and you must apply for individual health insurance within 63 days of losing your prior creditable coverage. When you are buying individual health coverage, HIPAA eligibility gives you greater protections than you would otherwise have in Alabama and in other states. See also COBRA, Continuous Coverage, Creditable Coverage, and State Continuation Coverage.

**HMO.** Health maintenance organization. A kind of health insurance 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 Insurance.** 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 Alabama.

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

**Late Enrollment.** Enrollment in a health plan at a time other than the regular or a special enrollment period. If you are a late enrollee, you may 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 Alabama 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.

***Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC).*** PBGC is a federal government corporation established by Title IV of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA) to encourage the continuation and maintenance of defined benefit pension plans, provide timely and uninterrupted payment of pension benefits to participants and beneficiaries in plans covered by PBGC. It currently guarantees payment of basic pension benefits earned by American workers and retirees participating in private-sector defined benefit pension plans. The agency receives no funds from general tax revenues. Operations are financed largely by insurance premiums paid by companies that sponsor pension plans and by PBGC's investment returns.

***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 30 days cannot be subject to pre-existing condition exclusions.

***Pre-existing Condition (Individual Health Insurance).*** Any condition, as determined by the insurer, that existed within the 60-month period immediately preceding the effective date of the health insurance policy. A pre-existing condition period cannot be imposed for a period of 24 months. Under individual health policies, pregnancy can be counted as a pre-existing condition. Genetic information cannot be considered a pre-existing condition. Newborns covered under an automatic coverage period cannot be subject to pre-existing condition exclusions. See also Genetic Information, 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.

***Self-Insured Group Health Plans.*** Plans set up by employers who set aside funds to pay their employees' health claims. Because employers often hire insurance companies 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 Alabama.

***Small Group Health Insurance Policy.*** 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 insurance 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.*** Many states have a law similar to COBRA that covers persons who work for employers with 2-19 employees. Alabama does not have a state continuation law. 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 Family Assistance or FA) 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.

***Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) Program.*** A program authorized by the Trade Adjustment Assistance Reform Act of 2002. This program provides aid to workers who lose their job or whose hours of work and wages are reduced as a result of increased imports. The TAA Program offers six benefits and reemployment services to assist unemployed workers prepare for and obtain new suitable employment. In addition, TAA offers a significant tax credit that covers 65% of health insurance premiums for certain plans.

***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 benefits. Not all employers require waiting periods. Waiting periods do not count as gaps in health insurance 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.