

How To File an Insurance Claim

Insurance is a security blanket. You sleep comfortably, knowing it's there, but you hope you'll never have to use it. If you do need it, however, it's helpful to know what to do.

For a claim under any insurance policy, step number one is to notify your insurance agent that you have had a loss. He or she will tell you what to do next and send along any claim forms that have to be filled out. If your insurance is provided through your employer, your human resources director will likely have the necessary forms.

Step number two is to fill out those forms and submit them as quickly as possible. In the case of a life insurance claim, you may have to submit the policy document itself along with the claim form and a death certificate. Insurance companies generally act very promptly to pay claims, but they can't act until the paperwork is complete. Doing your share will speed things up.

Although your agent can help you with the details, you'll find it helpful if you've kept policies at hand. Life insurance policies, in fact, should never be kept in a safety deposit box. In most states, boxes are temporarily sealed upon the death of the owner. Although an executor can obtain access to the box to locate a will and insurance policies, the need to do so could slow receipt of the funds just when they're most needed.

Here are answers to some common questions about life and health insurance claims:

Q: My father told me that he had life insurance, but I couldn't find a policy after his death. What do I do now?

A: A review of your father's checkbook or bank debit may turn up the name of his life insurance agent or the insurance company. If it does, you'll be able to get the policy number and file a claim. If not, write to the Missing Policy Service at the American Council of Life Insurance, 1001 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20004-2599. Include a self-addressed business size envelope.

Q: Sometimes my health insurance company pays my medical bills directly and

sometimes it reimburses me after I pay the bills. Why the difference?

A: Hospital bills, which tend to be quite high, are typically paid directly by health insurance companies. Doctor bills may also be paid directly, if the physician will accept direct payment; some don't, because it can take longer for them to receive the money.

Medical bills are often paid by you, the consumer, with reimbursement from the health insurance company. If there is a yearly deductible amount, once that amount is satisfied, there may be a co-payment feature under which the company pays 80 percent of all covered claims and you pay the balance, up to a specified amount.