9 DISABILITY INCOME AND LONG-TERM CARE INSURANCE

Disability income insurance and long-term care insurance provide important financial protection for American families. Disability income insurance serves as paycheck protection for workers by replacing a portion of earnings if an insured employee is unable to work due to accident or illness. Long-term care insurance protects retirement savings and alleviates financial hardships that might otherwise impoverish a family paying for long-term care needs.

DISABILITY INCOME INSURANCE

Prolonged unemployment due to disability can jeopardize a worker's lifestyle and savings for retirement. The risk of becoming disabled is significant: According to the US Census Bureau, nearly seventeen percent of working-age Americans reported a disability in 2010. Of those with a disability, 18.1 percent were employed compared to the 65.5 percent of working-age Americans with no disability in 2016.

Disability income policies commonly provide 50 to 70 percent of an insured's pre-disability income while an insured employee is unable to work due to accident or illness. In addition to choices in benefits and elimination periods, some policies provide comprehensive protection while others define disability more narrowly, covering only accidental injury or illness. Policies may also include coverage for partial disability, residual benefits, cost-of-living adjustments, survivor benefits, and pension supplements. Many also include benefits to help people return to work following a disability.

Often insurers will reduce benefits if an employee is receiving disability payments from other sources. Workers compensation pays cash benefits to workers disabled by an on-the-job accident or illness. Because workers compensation is a state-administered program, rules governing payment, benefit levels, and length of coverage vary considerably from state to state. Workers whose illness or injury is not caused on the job may be eligible for paid sick leave or state-mandated short-term disability benefits. The federal disability insurance program under the Social Security Administration, known as SSDI, provides cash assistance to people with long-term disabilities who are unable to work. SSDI's modest income support is limited to those who meet a very strict test of work disability.

Both individual and group disability income insurance pay benefits as an indemnity—usually weekly or monthly. Disability income insurance may be offered by employers, purchased individually, or used to protect a business. Employers may offer insurance for either short- or long-term disabilities, or provide comprehensive disability protection. Some policies reimburse businesses for expenses associated with disability. Each of these types of policies is described below.

Individual Disability Income Insurance

Individual disability income policies are sold to the self-employed, professionals, and to a market of diverse needs. Some people prefer individual coverage rather than group coverage because the former is portable. Workers, whose employers provide only basic coverage, may buy additional disability insurance through an individual policy. Companies also purchase disability income insurance to protect or dispose of the business if a key employee or the owner becomes disabled.

Personal Coverage

Most people buy individual disability income insurance to protect against long-term disability. Individual policies typically cover both occupational and non-occupational accidents and sickness for a selected term. Individual long-term disability benefits are not subject to income tax if the policyholder pays the premiums in full. Since benefits are designed to replace earned income, most people do not purchase coverage beyond their working years.

Disability income insurance for individuals is offered primarily in two forms. Non-cancellable policies give policyholders the right to continue coverage as long as premiums are paid on time. The insurer cannot change the premiums or benefits prior to an age stated in the policy, usually 65. Insurers also offer guaranteed renewable policies that can be automatically renewed with the same benefits. The premium for this type of policy may be increased only if it is changed for the entire class of policyholders.

Business Coverage

A small proportion of individual disability income policies is bought by business owners.

Key-person disability insurance replaces income lost when an essential employee or owner is unable to work. Some policies pay benefits directly to the insured as salary continuation, while others pay benefits to the business to protect the company from sudden loss of income, credit, or profits. Another form of protection is disability buy-sell insurance, which pays benefits to the business to enable owners to purchase interest in the company from a disabled partner or owner.

Businesses frequently obtain a disability income policy to cover business overhead expenses, including wages, in case the owner becomes disabled. A business also can purchase reducing term disability insurance to help cover loan repayments, purchase agreements, or salary contracts if the owner or key employee becomes disabled. This type of insurance is in effect for the length of the loan or other commitment, and coverage is reduced as the amount due is paid off.

Group Disability Income Insurance

Many disability income policies are offered as part of an employee group benefit package. Employers purchase disability coverage from an insurance company or self-insure the benefits. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 40 percent of all workers in private industry were participating in short-term disability income insurance in 2016; 32 percent were participating in long-term disability income insurance.

Short-Term Coverage

Short-term coverage helps protect against loss of income for employees unable to work because of a temporary illness or injury. Such sickness and accident plans replace a portion of earnings for a fixed period of time. Benefits commonly last 24 weeks, although coverage can range from 13 to 104 weeks. Short-term disability income insurance also can offer protection during the waiting period before a worker becomes eligible for SSDI or long-term disability coverage.

Disability income insurance pays short-term benefits as either a percentage of employee earnings or a flat dollar amount. The most common plans pay a percentage of earnings, typically replacing from one-half to two-thirds of pre-disability income. A majority of these plans places a dollar limit on the weekly or monthly benefit. Benefits also can vary depending on length of service and other factors. Most short-term coverage requires a waiting period, usually one to seven days, before benefits begin.

Long-Term Coverage

Long-term disability income plans cover both occupational and non-occupational sickness and accidents. Benefits typically start when short-term benefits are exhausted after a waiting period of three to six months following the onset of disability. These policies generally provide benefits for persons up to age 65 or Social Security retirement age. In certain cases, long-term coverage may provide benefits for life.

Almost all group long-term disability plans coordinate with Social Security and typically require claimants to apply for SSDI benefits. Disability insurers frequently offset benefits payable under private insurance dollar-for-dollar with SSDI payments. Benefits also are subject to income tax if the employer pays the premiums; they are not taxable if the employee pays the premiums.

LONG-TERM CARE INSURANCE

Long-term care insurance pays for services to help policyholders who are unable to perform certain activities of daily living without assistance—such as bathing, eating, dressing, using the toilet, and transferring from bed to chair. This insurance also pays benefits when the insured person requires supervision due to a cognitive impairment such as Alzheimer's disease.

Since the likelihood of chronic illness or disability increases with age, long-term care insurance traditionally has been sold to older Americans. However, the younger the purchaser, the lower the premiums, and within the last 10 years, group insurance plans have begun covering working-age people. In 2016, life insurers collected $11.4 billion in long-term care insurance premiums (NAIC data).

The market for private long-term care insurance is closely linked to federal and state government policy. Public funding for long-term care comes from two main sources. Medicaid—a joint federal-state program that targets low income people—is the primary government funding source for long-term care. To qualify, beneficiaries must deplete most of their assets and meet a strict income test. Medicare primarily pays for medically related recovery and rehabilitation services at home or in a nursing home.

There are two basic types of long-term care insurance: individual insurance and group. The latter is employer-sponsored or offered through an association. These products are considered long-term if the benefit is one year or longer. Long-term care protection also is available through life insurance policies that accelerate the death benefits for individuals with chronic conditions.

Long-term care insurance has evolved in response to changes in the long-term care delivery system and consumer preferences. When first sold in 1972, policies covered only skilled care in a nursing home after a period of hospitalization. Since the mid-1980s, consumers have demanded greater choice and more help in maintaining their quality of life. Insurers now offer policies covering services that promote independent living including personal care, assisted living, care management, support for family caregivers, home modifications, homemaker services, and hospice, in addition to institutional care.

Coverage for long-term care also varies by how benefits are paid. Traditional indemnity policies offer a fixed daily payment to eligible beneficiaries, usually in a nursing home. Other policies reimburse the insured for expenses, up to the policy's daily maximum—for example, $150 per day for nursing home care or $100 per day for home care. Most reimbursement policies now pool benefit dollars under more flexible spending limits, so that a beneficiary can receive payment for either nursing-home care or home- and community-based care. A third payment method uses a disability model, providing a cash benefit when eligibility requirements are met, regardless of whether the insured actually uses any long-term care services.

Individual Long-Term Care Coverage

Individual long-term care insurance can be tailored to meet financial and lifestyle goals. The policyholder selects the length of benefit term (one to five years or a lifetime) and other options such as the amount of maximum daily benefit, length of elimination period, level of care, inflation protection, and nonforfeiture benefits.

Most individual long-term care insurance is offered as a guaranteed renewable policy—renewable with the same benefits as long as premiums are paid on time. Premiums cannot be increased unless they are changed for the entire class of policyholders. Since long-term care policies do not build cash value, buying a nonforfeiture benefit or selecting a policy with contingent nonforfeiture protection allows the insured to receive benefits upon surrendering the policy. Some policies offer riders that return premiums upon the death of the insured.

Group Long-Term Care Coverage

Businesses, some state governments, unions, and fraternal and other associations such as AARP sponsor group long-term care insurance. Groups can either purchase long-term care coverage from an insurance company or self-insure. Under self-insured plans, the members of the group, usually employees, assume all risks and expenses of providing long-term care coverage. Most employers offering this benefit purchase group insurance coverage.

Group long-term care insurance typically is offered as a voluntary benefit for which the employee pays some or all of the premium. Long-term care insurance purchased through the workplace also is portable: Employees can retain coverage in retirement or if they change employers by paying the entire premium directly to the insurer.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 17 percent of all workers in private industry had access to long-term care insurance at work in 2016.

ACCELERATED BENEFITS

To help pay long-term care costs, certain life insurance policies allow the policyholder to access benefits prior to death. Circumstances that can trigger these accelerated benefits include diagnosis of a terminal illness or a medical condition that would drastically shorten the policyholder's life span, the need for long-term care, or permanent confinement in a nursing home. Accelerated benefit provisions may be integrated in the policy or more typically attached as a rider.