How Much Drug Testing is Too Much?

The amount of opioid drugs prescribed and sold in the US quadrupled since 1999. In the same time period, the US has experienced over 165,000 deaths have occurred due to prescription opioid overdose. We are facing an epidemic. Urine drug screening is recommended by the CDC to assess for appropriate use of prescribed medications and illicit drugs to help prevent overdoses due to abuse of opioids.

For health plans, urine drug screening is a significant cost driver with annual spend more than $8.5 billion, as illustrated in this article from Modern Healthcare. The challenge is compounded by the lack of clear national standards regarding the appropriate use of these tests, with some physicians ordering drug tests much more often than their peers. Many labs also conduct unnecessarily broad panels (for example, including genetic testing in every urine drug screen) which results in excess costs for the health plan. Drug testing can also be a significant source of fraudulent behavior and abuse from the overutilization perspective.

The CDC calls for opioid testing at start of treatment and annually thereafter, or at the physician’s discretion. When prescribing opioids for chronic pain, the CDC’s guidance recommends that clinicians use urine drug testing before starting opioid therapy and consider urine drug testing at least annually to assess for prescribed medications as well as other controlled prescription drugs and illicit drugs. This guidance is helpful to physicians, but overly broad and does not address the cost management challenge for health plans.

Fortunately for health plans, Avalon’s comprehensive Laboratory Benefits Management program includes management of toxicology labs performing urine drug screens. Avalon promotes science-based policies aligned with recommendations from independent leading industry experts, and supports the policies with strong laboratory provider oversight. For urine drug screens, Avalon recommends policy to support appropriate test frequencies including tests for only the necessary drug classes. The Avalon network of independent laboratories is aligned with these best practices to ensure members receive appropriate care and are protected from unnecessary costs. With urine drug screens representing 10% of many health plans’ current laboratory costs, the savings from Avalon’s program can be significant.

As one piece of the pie, this example of the waste and abuse in the lab industry represents the need for dedicated expertise in managing a high-volume, low-unit cost segment of medical spend. Avalon Healthcare Solutions offers 140 science-based policies supported by millions of automated policy enforcement edits. The Avalon program covers all laboratory tests across all providers, and features advanced analytics to detect patterns of fraud and abuse. Contact us today to ensure your members receive the appropriate laboratory care without paying for too much.