

What Is “Gold Carding”?

“Gold Carding” is a program used by some health plans that waives, on a limited basis, prior authorization (PA) rules for certain services provided by clinicians who are deemed “high-performing.” The clinician’s “gold card” exemption from prior authorization is effective for a limited service or set of services, for a defined period, and is reviewed regularly to ensure the clinician continues providing appropriate care.

What is prior authorization and why is it used?

Prior authorization is used by plan sponsors to improve clinical safety, decrease inappropriate utilization and waste,¹ and help ensure appropriate use of high-risk and/or high-cost drugs. In the pharmacy benefit, a PA helps ensure the appropriateness of medication prescribed for patients and promotes the most cost-effective therapies.² It is often used to evaluate prescriptions for drugs that are intended for certain age groups or conditions only; drugs used for both cosmetic or therapeutic reasons, to ensure the drug is being prescribed for therapeutic treatment; drugs that have potentially harmful side effects, dangerous interactions, or risks for abuse or misuse; drugs that aren’t covered by insurance but are deemed medically necessary by the prescriber; or brand-name drugs that have a more affordable generic equivalent.³

What sort of factors determine whether a provider achieves “gold card” status?

Programs vary from plan to plan, but eligibility for a gold carding program is typically conditioned upon the provider having a demonstrated history following appropriate plan and medical evidence-based protocol. America’s Health Insurance Plans (AHIP) found in a survey of its member health plans using gold carding programs that “low prior authorization denial rates, minimal prior authorization requests, and risk-based contract participation” were three important qualities of a provider in determining eligibility.⁴

Is gold carding widely used for pharmacy benefits?

In a survey of health plan members, AHIP reported that 21% of the responding members used a gold carding program for prescription medications in 2022. Unlike medical claims, the pharmacy benefit payments are determined in real time.

Is gold carding the only way to streamline prior authorization for medications?

Electronic prescribing (“e-prescribing”), “real-time benefits tools,” and electronic prior authorization (e-PA) are three tools that reduce the time and paperwork for PAs. Prescribers e-prescribing send prescriptions instantly to patients’ pharmacies; real-time benefits tools inform prescribers about medications’ formulary placements and cost sharing at the time of prescribing, guiding patients toward the safest, most cost-effective drugs; and electronically submitting a PA can reduce the time needed to complete the request.⁵ AHIP found, when it studied a new e-PA initiative that began in January 2020, that e-PA led to “faster time to patient care, faster time to a decision, lower burden from phone calls and faxes, and improved information for providers.”⁶ In AHIP’s 2022 survey, 75 percent of health plans responding indicated that they used e-PA to help streamline the process of PA.

1 Visante (citing PBMI). 2023. “PBMs: Generating Savings for Plan Sponsors and Consumers, 2023,” p. 19.

2 GoodRx. 2022. “What is Prior Authorization? A Look at the Process and Tips for Approval.”

3 Id.; Visante p. 8

4 Health Payer Intelligence. “Gold Carding Has Mixed Effects on Streamlining Prior Authorization Processes,” Nov. 2022.

5 PCMA. 2023. “Patient Care.”

6 AHIP. 2022. “Effective Gold Carding Programs are Based on Evidence and Value for Patients.”

ABOUT PCMA

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