

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Imaging Services are the Second Most Common Outpatient Service

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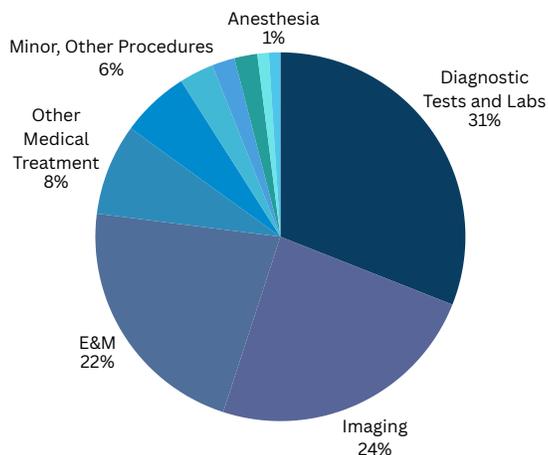
For many patients, imaging services are a critical part of how their medical issues are diagnosed and monitored. Imaging services take pictures of the inside of the body and range from x-rays to more advanced tests such as computed tomography (CT) scans, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), ultrasounds, and positron emission tomography (PET scans).

X-rays are commonly used to evaluate bone and chest conditions while computed tomography (CT) scans provide more detailed images to detect a broader range of diseases. MRIs use magnetic fields to create detailed images of the organs and structures in the body including the brain and spine. Ultrasounds rely on high frequency sound waves to evaluate organs and monitor certain conditions, such as pregnancy and abdominal issues. PET scans help reveal how organs and tissues function and can be used for cancer, brain disorders and heart disease. These imaging services can be provided in a doctor's office or in an outpatient hospital department, either during an office visit or as a separate appointment.

Across several HCCI analyses, imaging services have emerged as commonly used services that account for a significant amount of spending, specifically in hospital outpatient department settings. This brief highlights the use and price of imaging services in hospital outpatient settings among people with employer-sponsored insurance (ESI).

### Imaging services were the second most common reason for outpatient care.

**Figure 1: Hospital Outpatient Visits by Category, 2022**



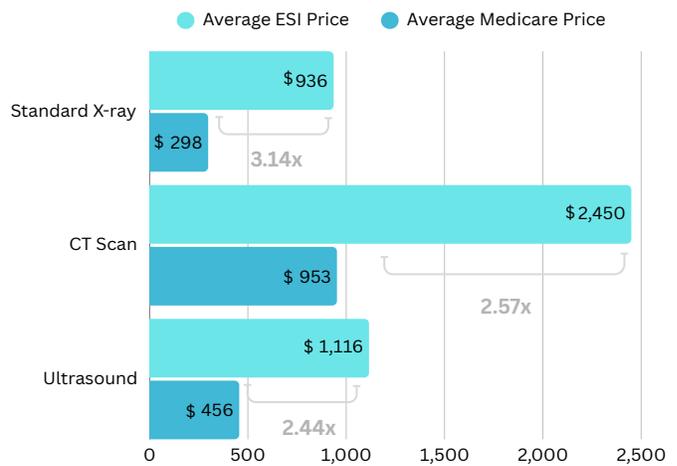
Source: HCCI commercial claims data

Imaging services made up 24% of outpatient visits and were the second largest category of outpatient spending (17%) in 2022. The most common imaging services were for screening mammography and chest x-rays, which are used for routine screening and diagnosing certain conditions. Other imaging services such as CT scans of the abdomen, echocardiography (ultrasound for the heart), and MRI of the brain occurred less often but had higher costs, making them some of the highest spending imaging services.

## Commercial prices of certain imaging services were over 2.4X the prices that Medicare charges.

One way to better understand prices in employer-sponsored insurance is to compare negotiated rates paid in ESI to Medicare payments for the same services. On average, the commercial prices of x-rays were 314% of Medicare, MRIs were 307% of Medicare, CT scans were 257% of Medicare, and Ultrasounds were 245% of Medicare. HCCI estimated that, if commercial prices were equal to Medicare prices, ESI spending would be \$6B lower for MRIs, \$3.1B lower for CT scans, \$2.7B lower for ultrasounds, \$1.5B lower for nuclear imaging, and \$1.2B lower for x-rays.

**Figure 2: Average ESI Service Price Relative to Medicare**

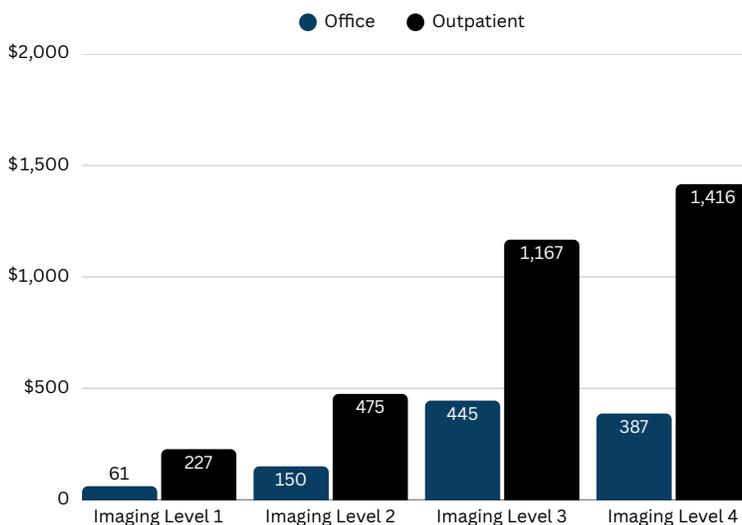


Source: HCCI commercial claims data

## Prices of imaging services at hospital outpatient departments ranged from 2-4X higher than at physician offices.

Many health care services that can be provided in either a hospital outpatient department or a physician office are more costly when they are provided in the outpatient department, and that pattern held for imaging services. HCCI reported imaging services in hospital outpatient departments had higher prices than those same services provided in physician offices. We examined imaging services without contrast levels 1 through 4, which refers to services such as ultrasounds or MRIs and the level of intensity or detail with level 4 being more complex than level 1.

**Figure 3: Service Price by Setting for Imaging Services**



Source: HCCI commercial claims data

The average price of Level 1 imaging services in hospital outpatient departments was \$227 in 2022, compared to \$61 in physician offices (3.7 times higher). That same year, level 4 imaging services cost 3.65 times more when performed in a hospital outpatient department (\$1,416) than when performed in an office setting (\$387).

## Imaging services were one of the biggest drivers of higher outpatient prices among for-profit hospitals compared with non-profit hospitals.

An earlier HCCI study found that outpatient prices were higher at for-profit hospitals compared to non-profit hospitals. A wide array of services are provided in the outpatient setting, and price differences between for-profit and non-profit hospitals also varied. For example, prices for evaluation and management (E&M) services were about 27% higher at for-profit hospitals and a similar pattern was observed for general lab services (\$89 at for-profit hospitals compared to \$55 at non-profit hospitals).

Figure 4: Weighted Price Index for Imaging Services



Source: HCCI commercial claims data

On average, the weighted price of imaging services at for-profit hospitals was around 8% higher among nonprofit hospitals which makes imaging services one of the key drivers of higher outpatient prices among for-profit hospitals, second to general labs, which were 57% higher in 2022.

### Conclusion

Imaging services are an integral part of health care for many people. Because of how they are used and its pricing, imaging services made up nearly 7% of per person spending in 2022. These services cost more than what Medicare pays and have large site of service differentials, meaning prices can change based on where you receive care. In the [2026 Outpatient Prospective Payment System Rule](#), the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services contemplated establishing site neutral payments for imaging without contrast services. As policymakers look to improve health care value, identifying opportunities to lower costs without adversely affecting quality will be paramount.

### ABOUT HCCI

The Health Care Cost Institute is an independent, non-profit research institute. HCCI's mission is to get to the heart of the key issues impacting the U.S. health care system by using the best data to get the best answers. HCCI stands for truth and consensus around the most important trends in health care, particularly those economic issues that are critical to a sustainable, high-performing health system. Our values are simple: health care claims data should be accessible to all those who have important questions to ask of it. Health care information should be transparent and easy to understand. All stakeholders in the health care system can drive improvements in quality and value with robust analytics. [Learn more at healthcostinstitute.org](#) [Health Care Cost Institute](#)