

# Life Insurance Buyer's Guide

## Maine

**This guide can show you how to save money when you shop for life insurance.**

**It helps you to:**

- **Decide how much life insurance you should buy,**
- **Decide what kind of life insurance policy you need, and**
- **Compare the cost of similar life insurance policies.**

Prepared by the Maine Bureau of Insurance

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THIS GUIDE DOES NOT ENDORSE ANY COMPANY OR POLICY

## **BUYING LIFE INSURANCE**

When you buy life insurance, you want a policy which fits your needs without costing too much.

First, decide how much you need – and for how long – and what you can afford to pay. Keep in mind the major reason you buy life insurance is to cover the financial effects of unexpected or untimely death. Life insurance can also be one of many ways you plan for the future.

Next, learn what kinds of policies will meet your needs and pick the one that best suits you.

Then, choose the combination of policy premium and benefits that emphasizes protection in case of early death, or benefits in case of long life, or a combination of both.

A good life insurance producer, consultant or company will be able and willing to help you with each of these shopping steps.

If you are going to make a good choice when you buy life insurance, you need to understand which kinds are available. If one kind does not seem to fit your needs, ask about the other kinds which are described in this guide. If you feel that you need more information than is given here, you may want to check with a life insurance producer, consultant or company or books on life insurance in your public library.

## **WHAT ABOUT THE POLICY YOU HAVE NOW?**

If you are thinking about dropping a life insurance policy, here are some things you should consider:

- If you decide to replace your policy, don't cancel your old policy until you have received the new one. You then have a minimum period to review your new policy

and decide if it is what you wanted.

- It may be costly to replace a policy. Much of what you paid in the early years of the policy you have now, paid for the company's cost of selling and issuing the policy. You may pay this type of cost again if you buy a new policy.
- Ask your tax advisor if dropping your policy could affect your income taxes.
- If you are older or your health has changed, premiums for the new policy will often be higher. You will not be able to buy a new policy if you are not insurable.
- You may have valuable rights and benefits in the policy you now have that are not in the new one.
- If the policy you have now no longer meets your needs, you may not have to replace it. You might be able to change your policy or add to it to get the coverage or benefits you now want.
- At least in the beginning, a policy may pay no benefits for some causes of death covered in the policy you have now.

In all cases, if you are thinking of buying a new policy, check with the agent or company that issued you the one you have now. When you bought your old policy, you may have seen an illustration of the benefits of your policy. Before replacing your policy, ask your agent or company for an updated illustration. Check to see how the policy has performed and what you might expect in the future, based on the amounts the company is paying now.

### **HOW MUCH DO YOU NEED?**

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- How much of the family income do I provide?

If I were to die early, how would my survivors, especially my children, get by? Does anyone else depend on me financially, such as a parent, grandparent, brother or sister?

- Do I have children for whom I'd like to set aside money to finish their education in the event of my death?
- How will my family pay final expenses and repay debts after my death?
- Do I have family members or organizations to whom I would like to leave money?
- Will there be estate taxes to pay after my death?
- How will inflation affect future needs?

As you figure out what you have to meet these needs, count the life insurance you have now, including any group insurance where you work or veteran's insurance. Don't forget Social Security and pension plan survivor's benefits. Add other assets you have: savings, investments, real estate and personal property. Which assets would your family sell or cash in to pay expenses after your death?

## **CHOOSING THE RIGHT KIND**

All life insurance policies agree to pay an amount of money if you die. But all policies are not the same. There are two basic kinds of life insurance.

1. Term insurance
2. Cash Value life insurance

Term insurance is death protection for a "term" of one or more years. Death benefits will be paid only if you die within that term of years. Term insurance generally provides the largest immediate death protection for your premium dollar.

Some term insurance policies are “renewable” for one or more additional terms even if your health has changed. Each time you renew the policy for a new term, premiums will be higher. You should check the premiums at older ages and the length of time the policy can be continued.

Some term insurance policies are also “convertible.” This means that before the end of the conversion period, you may trade the term policy for a cash value policy even if you are not in good health. Premiums for the new policy will be higher than you have been paying for the term insurance.

Cash Value Life Insurance is a type of insurance where the premiums charged are higher at the beginning than they would be for the same amount of term insurance. The part of the premium that is not used for the cost of insurance is invested by the company and builds up a cash value that may be used in a variety of ways. You may borrow against a policy’s cash value by taking a policy loan. If you don’t pay back the loan and the interest on it, the amount you owe will be subtracted from the benefits when you die, or from the cash value if you stop paying premiums and take out the remaining cash value. You can also use your cash value to keep insurance protection for a limited time or to buy a reduced amount without having to pay more premiums. You also can use the cash value to increase your income in retirement or to help pay for needs such as a child’s tuition without canceling the policy. However, to build up this cash value, you must pay higher premiums in the earlier years of the policy. Cash value life insurance may be one of several types: whole life, universal life and variable life are all types of cash value insurance.

**Whole Life Insurance** gives death protection for as long as you live. The most common type is called “straight life” or “ordinary life” insurance, for which you pay the same premiums for as long as you live. These premiums can be several times higher than you would pay initially for the same amount of term insurance. But they are smaller than the premiums you would eventually pay if you were to keep renewing a term insurance policy until your later years.

Some whole life policies let you pay premiums for a shorter period such as 20 years, or until age 65. Premiums for these policies are higher than for ordinary life insurance since the premium payments are squeezed into a shorter period.

**Universal Life Insurance** Universal Life Insurance is a kind of flexible policy that lets you vary your premium payments. You can also adjust the face amount of your coverage. Increases may require proof that you qualify for the new death benefit. The premiums you pay (less expense charges) go into a policy account that earns interest. Charges are deducted from the account. If your yearly premium payment plus the interest your account earns is less than the charges, your account value will become lower. If it keeps dropping, eventually your coverage will end. To prevent that, you may need to start making premium payments, or increase your premium payments, or lower your death benefits. Even if there is enough in your account to pay the premiums, continuing to pay premiums yourself means that you build up more cash value.

**Variable Life Insurance** is a kind of insurance where the death benefits and cash values depend on the investment performance of one or more separate accounts, which may be invested in mutual

funds or other investments allowed under the policy. Be sure to get the prospectus from the company when buying this kind of policy and study it carefully. You will have higher death benefits and cash value if the underlying investments do well. Your benefits and cash value will be lower or may disappear if the investments you chose don't do as well as you expected. You may pay an extra premium for a guaranteed death benefit.

## **FINDING A GOOD VALUE IN LIFE INSURANCE**

After you have decided which kind of life insurance is best for you, compare similar policies from different companies to find which one is likely to give you the best value for your money. A simple comparison of the premiums is not enough. There are other things to consider. For example:

- Do premiums or benefits vary from year to year?
- How much do the benefits build up in the policy?
- What part of the premiums or benefits is not guaranteed?
- What is the effect of interest on money paid and received at different times on the policy?

Once you have decided which type of policy to buy, you should compare similar policies from several companies. Life insurance agents or companies should give you either a life insurance illustration, a cost comparison index, or both. Life insurance illustrations and cost comparison indexes are described below.

Remember that no one company offers the lowest cost at all ages for all kinds and

amounts of insurance. You should also consider other factors:

- How quickly does the cash value grow? Some policies have low cash values in the early years that build quickly later on. Other policies have a more level cash value build-up. A year-by-year display of values and benefits can be very helpful. (The producer or company will give you a policy summary or an illustration that will show benefits and premiums for selected years.)
- Are there special policy features that particularly suit your needs?
- How are non-guaranteed values calculated? For example, interest rates are important in determining policy returns. In some companies increases reflect the average interest earnings on all of that company's policies regardless of when issued. In others, the return for policies issued in a recent year, or a group of years, reflect the interest earning on that group of policies; in this case, amounts paid are likely to change more rapidly when interest rates change.

## **LIFE INSURANCE ILLUSTRATIONS**

You may be thinking of buying a policy where cash values, death benefits, dividends or premiums may vary based on events or situations the company does not guarantee (such as interest rates). If so, you may get an illustration from the producer or company that helps explain how the policy works. The illustration will show how the benefits that are not guaranteed will change as interest rates and other factors change. The illustration will show you what the company guarantees. It will also show you what could happen in the future. You should be ready to adjust your financial plans if the cash value doesn't increase as quickly as shown in the illustration. You will be asked to sign

a statement that says you understand that some of the numbers in the illustration are not guaranteed.

## **COST COMPARISON INDEXES**

If you are provided cost comparison indexes, there will be two types:

**Life Insurance Surrender Cost Index.** This index is useful if you consider the level of the cash values to be of primary importance to you. It helps you compare costs if at some future point in time, such as 10 or 20 years, you were to surrender the policy and take its cash value.

**Life Insurance Net Payment Cost Index.** This index is useful if your main concern is the benefits that are to be paid at your death and if the level of cash values is of secondary importance to you. It helps you compare costs at some future point in time, such as 10 or 20 years, if you continue paying premiums on your policy and do not take its cash value.

## **HOW DO I USE COST INDEXES?**

The most important thing to remember when using cost indexes is that a policy with a small index number is generally a better buy than a comparable policy with a larger index number. The following rules are also important:

Cost comparisons should only be made between similar plans of life insurance. Similar plans are those which provide essentially the same basic benefits and require premium payments for approximately the same period of time. The closer policies are to being identical, the more reliable the cost comparison will be.

Cost comparison indexes reflect only guaranteed benefits and premiums. If the policy has non-guaranteed elements such as

dividends, the actual cost may turn out to be less than what the index reflects.

Compare index numbers only for the kind of policy, for your age and for the amount you intend to buy. Since no one company offers the lowest cost for all amounts of insurance, it is important that you get the indexes for the actual policy, age and amount which you intend to buy. Just because one company's policy is a good buy for a particular age and amount, you should not assume that all of that company's policies are equally good buys.

Small differences in index numbers could be offset by other policy features, or differences in the quality of service you may expect from the company or its agent. Therefore, when you find small differences in cost indexes, your choice should be based on something other than cost.

In any event, you will need other information on which to base your purchase decision. Be sure you can afford the premiums, and that you understand its cash values, dividends and death benefits. You should also make a judgment on how well the life insurance company or agent will provide service in the future to you as a policyholder.

These life insurance cost indexes apply to new policies and should not be used to determine whether you should drop a policy you have already owned for a while, in favor of a new one. If such a replacement is suggested, you should ask for information from the company which issued the old policy before you take action.



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