

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Medicare Open Enrollment begins Saturday -- seniors have more benefits, better choices, lower costs

Affordable Care Act gives seniors with Medicare cheaper prescription drugs, free preventive services, and lower costs

With more benefits, better choices and lower costs, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) is encouraging people with Medicare and their families to begin reviewing drug and health plan coverage options for 2012. The Medicare Open Enrollment Period -- which begins earlier this year on Saturday, October 15 – has been expanded to last seven weeks and will end on December 7. This will give seniors and people with disabilities more time to compare and find the best plan that meets their unique needs. Across the country, HHS officials will hold 150 events in the days leading up to Medicare’s Open Enrollment Period to inform and educate people with Medicare.

“Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, people with Medicare can get certain preventive services for free and can get more affordable prescription drugs,” said HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. “Open enrollment is seniors’ chance to review their Medicare choices and pick the plan that works for them, or keep the plan they have today.”

Beginning today, people with Medicare can begin reviewing the 2012 quality ratings for Medicare Advantage health plans (Part C) and prescription drug plans (Part D) for the upcoming year.

This year CMS is highlighting plans that have achieved an overall quality rating of 5 stars with a high performer or “gold star” icon so people with Medicare can easily find high quality plans. People with Medicare can switch to an available 5-star plan at any time during the year.

Using Medicare’s Plan Finder – available at www.medicare.gov/find-a-plan – people will see the enhanced star ratings for 2012. In addition to the enhanced star ratings for 2012 and new “gold star” icon, Plan Finder users will see an icon showing which plans received a low overall quality rating for the past three years.

“Over the past year, we have worked to improve health coverage choices for people with Medicare, and make it easier for people to find a plan that is both a good value and meets their health care needs,” said CMS Administrator Donald M. Berwick, M.D. “Due to these efforts, people with Medicare have good, meaningful choices for their 2012 plan options.”

In 2012, thanks to the Affordable Care Act, additional benefits to people with Medicare include lower prescription drug costs through a 50 percent discount on covered brand name drugs in the coverage gap (also referred to as the “donut hole”), wellness checkups, and access to certain preventive care with no copayments – a benefit that all Medicare Advantage plans will offer starting in 2012.

Resources for Medicare Beneficiaries

People with Medicare, their families and other trusted representatives can review and compare current plan coverage with new plan offerings, using many proven resources, including:

- Visiting www.medicare.gov, where they can get a personalized comparison of costs and coverage of the plans available in their area. The popular Medicare Plan Finder tool has been enhanced for an efficient review of plan choices. Spanish Open Enrollment information is available.
- Calling 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227) for around-the-clock assistance to find out more about coverage options. TTY users should call 1-877-486-2048. Multilingual counseling is available.
- Reviewing the 2012 *Medicare & You* handbook. It is also accessible online at: <http://www.medicare.gov/publications/pubs/pdf/10050.pdf> -- and it has been mailed to the homes of people with Medicare.
- Getting one-on-one counseling assistance from the local State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP). Local SHIP contact information can be found:
 - At <http://www.medicare.gov/contacts/organization-search-criteria.aspx> or
 - On the back of the 2011 *Medicare & You* handbook or;
 - By calling Medicare (contact information above).
 - Through a listing of national stand-alone prescription drug plans and State specific fact sheets can be found at: <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/center/openenrollment.asp>

People with Medicare who have limited incomes and resources may qualify for Extra Help paying for their prescription drug costs. There is no cost to apply for Extra Help, also called the low-income subsidy. Medicare beneficiaries, family members, trusted counselors or caregivers can apply online at www.socialsecurity.gov/prescriptionhelp or call Social Security at 1-800-772-1213 (TTY users should call 1-800-325-0778) to find out more.

Protecting Against Fraud and Identity Theft

During this Open Enrollment Period, Medicare recommends that people treat their Medicare number as they do their social security number and credit card information. People with Medicare should never give their personal information to anyone arriving at their home uninvited or making unsolicited phone calls selling Medicare-related products or services. Beneficiaries who believe they are a victim of fraud or identity theft should contact Medicare (contact information above). More information is available at www.stopmedicarefraud.gov

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Note: All HHS press releases, fact sheets and other press materials are available at <http://www.hhs.gov/news>.