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Seniors, don't just pick a card, any card

By Sandra Block and Julie Appleby, USA TODAY

The new Medicare drug discount cards become effective Tuesday, but if you haven't signed up, don't cancel your weekend plans. For many seniors, it may pay to procrastinate.

The discount cards are projected to reduce seniors' prescription drug costs by an average of 15%. In addition, low-income seniors may qualify for a \$600 credit toward the cost of prescription drugs. **(Related story: [Listen to your mama: Shop around for deals](#))**

Medication costs go higher

Brand-name drugs with the highest manufacturer price increases between 2000 and 2003

Drug	Medical condition	% increase
Premarin (0.3 mg)	menopause	21.4%
Altace (10 mg)	high blood pressure	12.6%
Synthroid, (88 mg)	thyroid disease	11.9%
Alphagan P	glaucoma	10.4%
Combivent	asthma, emphysema	10.3%

Source: AARP

But selecting the right discount card will be a challenge for many seniors, and Medicare is still working out some glitches in the program. For that reason, most seniors should wait another week or two before signing up, says Judith Stein, executive director of the Center for Medicare Advocacy.

More than 71 sponsors are offering cards through the program, but you're only allowed to pick one. Some carry annual fees of up to \$30 a year. And once you've selected a card, you can't switch until 2005.

Card sponsors, however, can change their prices or the drugs they cover whenever they want. Discounts can change from week to week. Competition among card issuers may pressure some to lower their prices.

Even seniors who are eligible for the subsidy (see box) may benefit by waiting, says Bonnie Burns, training and policy specialist with California Health Advocates, a government-funded group that helps the elderly sort through medical issues. Otherwise, you risk signing up for a card with higher prices, and

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your subsidy won't go as far, she says.

Officials: Prices have settled

Officials at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) say competition already has pushed prices down, and they are urging Medicare members to sign up as soon as possible. After the first full week that the Medicare Internet site listed prices, prices declined by about 11.5% for brand name drugs and 12.5% for generic drugs in a sample of 31 ZIP codes around the USA, Medicare officials said. Prices dropped about 2% to 3% more the following week, says CMS administrator Mark McClellan.

"The prices are settling out a bit, and we're now in a more stable situation," says McClellan, who says the program will have the biggest benefit for those who have little or no other insurance coverage for drugs.

"If you have drug coverage through a private plan, like Medicare Advantage, or through a former employer or a spouse, you're probably better off sticking where you are," McClellan says. If not, "Then it's probably worth finding out more about the program."

Whether you sign up now or later, be prepared to devote some time to the project. Some tips on finding the card that's best for you:

•**Gather the information you need before you start your card search.** Make sure you have the correct names of the drugs you take and their proper dosage. The latter is particularly important because discounts can vary greatly depending on a drug's dosage, Stein says.

Make a list of your drugs, starting with your most expensive prescriptions, Stein says. This is important, because some cards may not cover all the drugs you take. You'll also need your ZIP code and the pharmacy you prefer to use, along with a second choice.

You also can request mail-order prices for your drugs. Many cards include a mail-order option, which is sometimes cheaper than prices offered by local pharmacies. Pay close attention, though. The mail-order prices listed may be for larger doses than those offered by pharmacies, making price comparisons more difficult.

•**If possible, use the Internet to conduct your search.** You can research card providers at www.medicare.gov.

The program allows you to search by listing your drugs, your ZIP code, and the distance you're willing to travel. If you're not satisfied with the list, you can expand your search area. You can search the site using just one drug or several and periodically review prices to see if they've changed.

Medicare members who don't have access to the Internet can call 800-633-4227 and request a list of card sponsors in their area. But some Medicare advocates worry that the operators may not cover all the options available. And many seniors who have called the toll-free number have had a hard time getting through to a human.

Medicare recently added more than 1,000 operators to handle calls and has taken other steps to reduce the wait time. The best times to call are between 6 p.m. and 6

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a.m. ET. The best days are Thursday, Friday and Sunday, Medicare officials said.

•Compare Medicare drug card prices with deals offered through other sources, such as big discount stores. Some critics have complained that the drug cards don't result in much savings over stores like Costco or Internet discount pharmacies, such as www.drugstore.com. And those providers don't charge an annual fee, although some stores have annual membership charges.

The government disputes those claims, pointing to a study released last week that compared Medicare drug card prices for commonly used drugs with other discounters' prices.

Medicare said its mail-order prices were 20% to 40% lower than those offered by Costco.com and 7% to 11% lower than drugstore.com's prices. At pharmacies, prices available through the Medicare cards were 4% to 7% lower than drug prices at Costco, Medicare said.

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