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Poll: 4 in 10 seniors don't know Medicare deadline

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WASHINGTON - About four in 10 older Americans don't know the enrollment deadline for the new Medicare drug benefit is May 15, and nearly half are unaware that they face a financial penalty if they delay, according to a new poll.

Medicare officials are making an aggressive push to move people without prescription drug coverage into the benefit before the deadline. An estimated 6-million to 7-million of 43-million beneficiaries have no drug coverage.

A poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation, a health care research group, indicates that many senior citizens aren't paying close attention. When interviewers asked seniors when the deadline is, about 55 percent gave the right answer. However, 34 percent said they didn't know and 6 percent said there was no deadline.

In the poll, 567 people 65 and older were interviewed in early April. The margin of error is plus or minus 5 percentage points.

It could be that many aren't paying attention because they have drug coverage and don't have to worry about it. But Mollyann Brodie, a vice president at the foundation, said the numbers deviated little regardless of a respondent's enrollment plans.

Some consumer advocacy groups, such as the Center for Medicare Advocacy, have called for an enrollment extension.

"The whole program requires people to pay a lot of attention, so much attention that many are not going to do it at all," said Judith Stein, the group's executive director.

Many in Congress, primarily Democrats, have called for a deadline extension.

Kathleen Harrington, director of external affairs at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said the agency still supports the May 15 deadline.

"The deadline serves a valuable purpose in motivating people to pay attention," she said. "These results appear to be contrary to some other tracking that we have seen, but we'll certainly take them seriously."

Forty-seven percent of the respondents didn't know there is a late enrollment penalty. The penalty amounts to 1 percent of the average monthly premium for each month of delay. Since seniors who miss the deadline can't sign up until the next open enrollment period in November, they would face about a 7 percent increase in their monthly premium.

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