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OCTOBER
2011

The annual enrollment period for Medicare Part D and Advantage Managed Care plans has been moved up this year to October 15, 2011 through December 7, 2011.

If you are a senior on Medicare – or if you help out aging parents with their money matters – it's time to get ready to shop. The annual enrollment period for Medicare prescription drug and Advantage managed care plans has begun, and it's one of the best opportunities of the year for seniors to save money.

The new healthcare reform law is reshaping certain parts of the Medicare marketplace, for the most part in ways that benefit seniors. Although the law gradually reduced subsidies to Medicare Advantage – a change that critics derides as 'slashing' Medicare – the advantage and prescription drug markets are doing just fine. The number of plan offerings for 2012 are stable and average prices are steady or falling slightly. *(For more on how the health-care reform law is affecting Medicare plans, click here for the complete article: [Some Medicare Plans Drop Prices: Time to Shop is Now.](#)*

The following article by Matthew Sturdevant of Courant.com discusses pricing changes in the various Medicare Part D prescription drug plans.

Prices for prescription-drug coverage for Medicare recipients are dropping by 4 percent on average across all plans, according to an analysis by a health care consulting group.

The top two insurers by membership, however, are increasing prices for Medicare Part D, the prescription drug plans sold by private insurers separate from government-funded Medicare, according to an analysis of federal data by Avalere Health. AARP MedicareRx Preferred plans offered by UnitedHealth Group are increasing monthly premiums by 14 percent to \$39.70 next year from an average of \$34.82 this year. UnitedHealth is the top insurer of Part D plans with 4.8 million people enrolled this year, followed by CVS Caremark with 3.4 million and Humana with 2.4 million.

UnitedHealth Group has several advantages that may allow the company to raise prices while others are lowering them, said Dan Mendelson, CEO and founder of Avalere Health, a consulting firm that works for health insurers, think tanks and government.

"They have a strong level of name and brand visibility with the AARP banner," he said. "I think that they're banking on the relative unwillingness or inability of seniors to shop aggressively. If people are happy with a health care product, they are often willing to sustain pricing increases. I think what's different here is that there are a range of plans gunning for that top position." UnitedHealth spokesman Matthew Burns said the company dropped its premiums last year by \$5, or 12 percent, on its Part D Preferred plans. Premiums in 2012 are slightly lower than they were in 2010, and the company boasts coverage of more branded drugs than other competitors.

Advocates for Medicare recipients consistently suggest that people look carefully over Part D plans to make sure the drugs they need are covered in the plan they pick.

Besides greater competition driving down price, Medicare Part D costs to insurers are expected to drop as the patents on some prescription drugs expire this year and next, allowing doctors to use less expensive generics instead.

A number of other insurers are dropping prices: Humana Enhanced by 9 percent to an average \$39.62 per month; CVS Caremark Value by 8 percent to \$30.49; First Health Part D Premier by 11 percent to \$32.88; and Cigna Medicare Rx Plan One is dropping 11 percent to an average \$31.19 per month.

Aetna is reducing prices for its Aetna/CVS Pharmacy PDP by 24 percent to \$26.55 per month and Aetna Premier -- which has far fewer participants than the Aetna/CVS plans -- is falling by 21 percent to \$79.83 per month, according to Avalere. Bloomfield-based Cigna Corp. has 541,066 members and Hartford-based Aetna has 429,408.

"We believe our pricing in 2012 for Medicare Part D plans will provide beneficiaries with affordable options that will enable them to access many of the prescription drugs they need," Aetna spokeswoman Susan Millerick said, "and will also make us more competitive in the Part D market. In 2012, Aetna will offer Part D plans with premiums lower than the Low-Income-Subsidy Benchmark in 40 states and the District of Columbia. This is historically an indicator of a Part D product that is well positioned to meet the needs of Medicare beneficiaries."

For other changes to Medicare, you can go to the U.S. Government Medicare handbook online at [Medicare & You](#).