

Maximize Your Pharmacy Benefits Counselor's Quick Guide

Medicare education counselors provide critical information and education to millions of consumers every year during Open Enrollment. Educating consumers about the many details to consider when selecting a plan is a big job, and Area Agencies on Aging play a crucial role by ensuring consumers have a trusted resource to help them navigate through a complex and confusing process.

But have you ever wondered what happens to the consumers after they select a plan? Once enrollment is over, and the Medicare insurance card is in their wallet, consumers generally don't try to learn more about their plan or how to maximize their benefits to achieve better health outcomes and savings.

Understanding prescription drug coverage, one of the most confusing aspects of Open Enrollment plan selection, continues to be challenging for consumers AFTER Open Enrollment, and this confusion can have consequences for them.

Understanding the problem

Older adults say **medication costs** and **not understanding their benefits** are the top challenges they face in trying to access health care, with the following consequences:

- Only 12 percent of Medicare beneficiaries maximize their pharmacy benefits¹; that means 88 percent of beneficiaries do not take advantage of Medicare Part D cost savings or extra benefits!
- Poor medication adherence results in up to \$290 billion of avoidable health care spending annually in the United States.²

Additionally, Medicare education counselors report that consumers are reluctant to ask questions, which leads to a continued lack of understanding and an inability to maximize their prescription drug benefits.

What is the solution? Education.

Medicare education counselors can help consumers understand that once Open Enrollment is over, **maximizing benefits is the next important step in the Medicare education process.**

Once they become informed, consumers should be encouraged to talk to their doctor and pharmacist about their prescription drugs and steps they can take to maximize their benefits, save money and ensure good health outcomes.

After all, older adults say **they want simple information on cost, provider networks and coverage.**³ The **Answers on Aging® Pharmacy Benefits** materials will help you educate consumers, and help them know what questions to ask their doctor and pharmacist as they try to make the most of their prescription drug benefits, while achieving good health outcomes and protecting their pocketbook.



What do consumers need to know to maximize Part D benefits?

Three key areas can help focus consumers on what's most important (after they have chosen their plan). **They need to know their pharmacy network, medications and situation.**

Help consumers “know” their information—their pharmacy network, medications and situation—and they'll be well on their way to maximizing their prescription drug plan benefits. Knowing their information will help consumers have the important discussions with doctors and pharmacists about what they can do to maximize the benefits of their Part D plan.

How can Medicare education counselors help?

Use the **Answers on Aging® Consumer Quick Guide** to help consumers understand their plan and how to use it wisely. This guide will serve as a resource to help consumers get to know their new prescription drug benefits plan and create a checklist to help make a confusing topic easier to organize and follow as they make decisions about how to best use their plan throughout the year.

1 Know your pharmacy network

- Choosing the right pharmacy and pharmacist can make a dramatic difference for older adults as they seek to maximize their Medicare Part D plan benefits.
- Remind consumers about the importance of selecting lower-cost medications and programs like medication therapy management (MTM), copay-reducing options like 90-day refills and over-the-counter therapies.
- Depending on the prescription drug plan, using a preferred pharmacy can reduce consumers' copays and may include other benefit enhancements.
- Knowing how to use a drug plan's formulary can provide dramatic cost savings for consumers. Help them review their prescription drug's tier within their Part D plan's formulary.

- Here's another place where a trusted pharmacist can be a big help. Consumers should ask their pharmacist whether another drug—even a different brand name drug (sometimes called a “preferred brand”)—might be in a lower tier and still provide an equivalent therapy.
- Using generics and preferred brands are great ways to lower drug costs.

2 Know your medications

- Help consumers consider the big picture. For example, are consumers talking with their doctor or pharmacist about all of their medications and any other health issues? Encourage them to ask their doctor about alternative medications that might be as effective as what was originally prescribed, but cost less. Consumers should know that doctors have these kinds of conversations with patients every day.
- If they need help paying for their medications—not just their drug plan premium—encourage consumers to discuss the situation with their pharmacists who can often suggest programs or other methods to keep prescription costs down.

3 Know your situation

Studies show that people with Medicare focus most on the Medicare plan's premium, and certainly that's an important consideration during the annual Open Enrollment period. **However, educating consumers that every trip to the pharmacy is an opportunity to lower their costs and maximize their benefits is important.** Help them understand that it's okay to ask questions of their doctor and pharmacist so they can take advantage of the many benefits available to them in their prescription drug plans.

Set the stage for maximizing their benefits throughout the year by walking them through the **Answers on Aging® Consumer Quick Guide and Checklist.**

1. Abaluck J, Gruber J. Choice Inconsistencies among the elderly: evidence from plan choice in the Medicare Part D program. *Amer Econ Rev.* 101(4):1180-1210.
2. Thinking outside the pillbox; a system-wide approach to improving patient medication adherence for chronic disease. New England Healthcare Institute Web site. http://www.nehi.net/writable/publication_files/file/pa_issue_brief_final.pdf. Accessed July 7, 2015.
3. Jacobson G, Swoope C, Perry M, Slosar MC. How are seniors choosing and changing health insurance plans. Kaiser Family Foundation Web site. <http://kff.org/medicare/report/how-are-seniors-choosing-and-changing-health-insuranceplans/>. Accessed July 7, 2015.