

Open Enrollment for 2021 Coverage through Medicare & the Marketplace

Basics for Advocates

This fact sheet provides basic information on the annual Open Enrollment Periods (OEP) in Medicare (Medicare.gov) and the Marketplace (HealthCare.gov and state-based exchanges) for the 2021 plan year and highlights issues that are of particular relevance to assisting low-income older adults.

Note: The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has not extended the OEP for either Medicare or Healthcare.gov due to the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE). People whose enrollment has been impacted by COVID or non-COVID emergencies such as hurricanes and fires may be eligible for a special enrollment period (SEP). Learn more on [CMS's Current Emergencies webpage](#) and [this memo](#).

Medicare Open Enrollment

Medicare beneficiaries have the opportunity to change their current health and prescription drug coverage during the Medicare OEP beginning October 15. It's particularly important for Part C and Part D enrollees to review their coverage options each year as Medicare Advantage (MA) and Prescription Drug Plans (PDP) can change their cost-sharing, provider networks, and drug formularies. This Open Enrollment period is different from the General Enrollment Period for individuals not yet enrolled in Medicare and is in addition to any SEPs an individual may qualify for.

WHO: Individuals currently enrolled in Medicare Parts A or B (original Medicare), Part C (Medicare Advantage), and D (prescription drug coverage) should review their coverage to make sure they choose the most affordable options to meet their needs in 2021.

WHEN: **October 15 to December 7, 2020.**

WHAT: Beneficiaries can enroll in or change Medicare Advantage and Part D Prescription Drug Plans, or switch from Medicare Advantage to original Medicare. Any changes to coverage take effect **January 1, 2021.**

Note: This year some—but not all—Medicare PDPs and MA-PDs are participating in the new "Part D Senior Savings Model." Participating plans are offering enhanced coverage of insulins on their formulary with a maximum out-of-pocket cost of \$35 per thirty-day supply per insulin prescription. Advocates should know that people who are enrolled in the Low-Income Subsidy (LIS or "Extra Help") are not eligible for the limited co-pay because the LIS program already limits copays for all covered prescription drugs. [Learn more in the CMS FAQ.](#)

In addition, Medicare Advantage Plans are continuing to offer new types of supplemental benefits that were first authorized for the 2020 plan year. It is important to understand that these new supplemental benefits are not available to all enrollees, have specific eligibility criteria and limitations, and may overlap with benefits covered by Medicaid for dually eligible beneficiaries. Plans are required to provide specific information in their plan Member Handbook about the scope of a particular benefit and the requirements for access to the benefit.

HOW: Encourage your clients to make an appointment with a State Health Insurance Program (SHIP) counselor (www.shiptacenter.org), visit Medicare.gov, or call 1-800-MEDICARE.

Note: Due to COVID-19, most SHIPs are providing virtual counseling only. Given ongoing changes to the Medicare Plan Finder online tool, we strongly recommend that Medicare beneficiaries work with a SHIP counselor when reviewing their coverage options for 2021. SHIP counselors have been trained on changes to the tool and are aware of issues with how information is presented that may be confusing or different from previous years and are in the best position to ensure beneficiaries are making informed choices. A directory of SHIPs providing free assistance is available at www.shiptacenter.org.

Tips for Making Sure Your Clients Are Not Overpaying for Medicare Coverage

In 2019, one million Medicare beneficiaries with the Low Income Subsidy (LIS or “Extra Help”) paid an average of nearly \$24/month for Part D premiums because they were not enrolled in a premium-free plan (a.k.a. a “benchmark” plan). Open Enrollment is the best opportunity for these individuals to review their coverage and change plans if necessary to better meet their needs and save money. [Read tips on how to help your LIS clients avoid overpaying for their coverage.](#)

When clients come with questions about their coverage and enrollment options, it also is an opportunity to make sure that they are enrolled in all programs for which they qualify. Despite being eligible, many people are not enrolled in the Part D Low Income Subsidy program, which reduces prescription drug costs, or the Qualified Medicare Beneficiary (QMB) program, which pays for premiums and cost-sharing including both Part B premiums and also Part A premiums for people without free Part A. Helping clients get enrolled in these programs can save them thousands of dollars per year and enable them to access care they might otherwise forgo due to cost.

Health Insurance Marketplace Open Enrollment

Older adults who are not eligible for Medicare and do not have other health insurance can use the annual fall Open Enrollment period to enroll in 2021 coverage through the Affordable Care Act’s Health Insurance Marketplaces. Marketplace coverage also is an option for many older immigrants who are eligible for Medicare coverage but, because they do not have sufficient work history, must pay a premium for Part A. See the resources below for more information on what older immigrants need to know about eligibility for Medicare, Medicaid, and the Marketplaces.

For 2021 enrollment, 15 states are operating their own state-based exchanges: California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Idaho, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington. Links to each state’s marketplace website are available on HealthCare.gov.

WHO: Consumers who are not eligible for Medicare and do not have other health insurance coverage can enroll or change coverage during open enrollment. Those who are eligible for Medicare but must pay a premium for Part A coverage, also have the option to enroll in a Marketplace plan but face penalties if they later decide to switch to Medicare. See [Medicare and Marketplace FAQ A3-A6](#).

Note: Consumers should enroll in Medicare as soon as they are eligible to avoid incurring late penalties. Enrolling in Marketplace coverage does not postpone an individual's Medicare initial enrollment period and could expose the individual to late enrollment penalties as well as liability for any tax credits received for Marketplace coverage. Certain individuals in this situation may be eligible for [equitable relief](#) from Part B penalties.

WHEN: **November 1 to December 15, 2020.**

Note: Some state-based Marketplaces have longer open enrollment periods and applications for Medicaid, and Marketplace financial assistance can be submitted year-round. Any changes in income or household size for current enrollees should be reported as soon as they occur.

WHAT: Consumers can enroll in or change health and dental plans available in their state. New coverage begins **January 1, 2021**. Applicants can also choose to be screened for premium tax credit and cost-sharing reduction eligibility as well as Medicaid eligibility.

HOW: Consumers can visit [HealthCare.gov](#) or call 1-800-318-2596 to apply, change plans, or find free in-person assistance.

Note: SHIPs, 1-800-Medicare and the Marketplace provide free interpreter services for individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP). Advocates should encourage their clients to ask for language assistance so that they can better understand their choices and get all their questions answered. Advocates should also remind clients that throughout the year, they can ask their plans for free interpreter assistance when they do not understand a plan communication or if they need other assistance.

Resources

- [Your Low-Income Clients May be Overpaying for Part D Prescription Drug Coverage](#), National Center on Law & Elder Rights
- [Updates | Medicare Open Enrollment Period, Starting October 15](#), Center for Medicare Advocacy
- [Medicare Open Enrollment: Tools for Professionals](#), National Council on Aging
- [Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Medicare and the Marketplace](#), Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
- [Medicare Open Enrollment FAQs](#), Kaiser Family Foundation
- Marketplace Enrollment [FAQs in English](#) and [in Spanish](#), Kaiser Family Foundation
- [Older Immigrants & Medicare](#), Justice in Aging
- [Public Charge & Immigrant Seniors](#), Justice in Aging
- [Public Charge Update: What Advocates Need to Know Now](#), Protecting Immigrant Families Campaign
- [Immigrant Eligibility for Public Programs During COVID-19](#), Protecting Immigrant Families Campaign