

Seniors urged not to rush in

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WASHINGTON BUREAU; Staff writer Dawn MacKeen on Long Island contributed to this story

April 30, 2004



WASHINGTON -- Federal health officials and senior advocates are cautioning seniors not to rush into choosing a Medicare drug discount card.

Federal officials say it's because information from companies offering the cards is still pouring in. Advocates argue it's because the discounts aren't that good anyway.

"We don't want individuals to rush right in and sign up because information is still flowing in," said Tommy Thompson, Health and Human Services secretary.

With more information expected weekly, Thompson said, seniors "will be able to compare and price-shop. I think it's going to be a very valuable tool."

Information on 35 of the 73 Medicare drug discount cards for seniors was available for the first time yesterday on Medicare's Web site.

While seniors can begin enrolling in the program Monday, the program doesn't take effect until June 1. The cards are temporary until the Medicare prescription drug benefit kicks in in 2006. Federal officials have touted the program as a way for seniors to save as much as 30 percent on their drug tabs.

But some senior advocates and consumer health groups complain the cards fall short of helping lower drug costs.

"The discount card is receiving a lot of hype from the Bush administration but it will not provide relief for seniors," said Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA. "With drug costs continuing to skyrocket, this program is like a used car salesman offering a \$3,000 discount after the sticker price was increased by \$4,000."

Families USA plans to release numbers Monday comparing prices of some of the popular drugs used by seniors. In one example yesterday, the group searched for a 30-day supply of Lipitor and found the lowest price of \$67.70 and highest of \$78 on the Medicare Web site. Outside the program, Lipitor was slightly lower at drugstore.com at \$63, \$40 at the Veteran's Administration and \$35 at a Canadian pharmacy.

Unlike drugstore.com, which offers mail orders, seniors in the program also can get discounts at their local pharmacies, said Mark McClellan, head of Medicare.

"This is another tool that people could use in addition to drugstore.com," said McClellan, adding that the agency has safety concerns about drugs imported from Canada. "This is a new, safe, easy option ... that seniors can use to get drugs right here in their neighborhood."

With some basic information, including ZIP code and the drug, seniors can use the Web site to get a list of the drugs companies offer and their prices. The Web site also offers seniors a comparison of prices. Prices can vary across regions.

It also lists the number of nearby pharmacies that will offer the drug under a plan, and enrollment fees, which range from free to up to \$30.

Seniors can get information by calling 1-800-MEDICARE.

Officials at PharmaCare, the pharmacy benefit management company and wholly owned subsidiary of CVS drugstores that will offer a national card, said they would monitor prices other cards offer over the month.

"We believe our prices initially are aggressive but we monitor the market and to the extent that we can lower the price we would," said vice president John Wardle.

Discounts so far average 17 percent for most brand-name drugs and 30 percent for generics, Thompson said.

Some senior advocates, however, said they are concerned about a "bait and switch" since companies can change the drugs and prices while seniors are locked into a plan.

Some senior groups in New York said they were bombarded yesterday with questions about the drug discount cards.

"Even though [federal Medicare officials have] done an excellent job with the Web site ... our phones are ringing off the hook," said Thomas Yandea, president of the New York State Association of Area Agencies on Aging. "We're going to need more resources. They're calling us already and they're going to be calling even more when the cards hit the street."

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