

# Doctors Top Source for Medicare Drug Information

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WASHINGTON — Older patients are choosing their physician over the telephone or using electronic resources to help them understand the complexities of the new prescription drug law.

Many beneficiaries don't understand what the new law does, and many are not comfortable looking for information about it on the Internet, Drew Altman, president and CEO of the Kaiser Family Foundation, said during the annual conference of the National Academy of Social Insurance.

In a Kaiser Family Foundation poll of more than 1,200 adults, only 13% of respondents said they understood the new law very well.

More than half of the respondents (53%) said they did not have enough information about the law to understand how it would impact them personally. The poll was conducted in December 2004 and included responses from 237 adults aged 65 years and older and 953 adults aged 18-64.

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In a question specifically addressed to seniors, respondents were asked what sources they would turn to for help. The majority (38%) said they'd ask for their physician's counsel, in deciding whether or not to enroll in a Medicare drug plan, Mr. Altman said during the meeting.

Seniors also cited Medicare offices, Web sites, or phone number (31%); pharmacists (30%); and health insurance companies (25%) as consultation sources for the new drug benefit.

Upon closer look, however, it doesn't seem like the Internet or the phone are popular venues to get information.

Forty-three percent of seniors who responded to the poll said they had never heard of the 1-800 Medicare number, and 42% acknowledged that they were aware of the toll-free number, but have never used it.

Only 6% of the respondents said they had heard of Medicare.gov, and 39% said they'd never heard of the Medicare Web site.

For those aged 65 and older, 73% said they have never gone online, and 85% said they've never gotten assistance from a friend or family member to visit an Internet site on their behalf to get information about Medicare.

Most of the information isn't access friendly to the average beneficiary, Roslyn Taylor, M.D., a family physician in Savannah, Ga., said in an interview.

"Many of the seniors do not have or know how to use computers." Those patients who said they do know how to use a computer "told me that even if they

went on the Web site, they still were confused," Dr. Taylor added.

Thirty-seven percent of the seniors who responded to the survey said they would prefer to get their Medicare information from mailings, and 25% said they would not mind obtaining the information in person from Medicare or Social Security offices.

Only 18% cited toll-free telephone hotlines as a preferred method.

Physicians themselves may need a

quick tutorial on the new Medicare benefits. "I think that a lot of physicians are not aware of the details regarding what new things Medicare is covering—and under what specific rules," said Colette Willins, M.D., who is a professor at Case Western Reserve University in Westlake, Ohio.

Older beneficiaries seemed more aware of specific benefits. Respectively, 86% and 67% of beneficiaries aged 65 and older knew about the discount drug card, and a

\$600 subsidy on the costs of drugs for low-income people.

Only 27% of beneficiaries aged 18-64 were aware of the subsidy.

Senior respondents seemed divided on their reported plans to enroll in the drug benefit in 2006.

Nineteen percent of the respondents said they would enroll in the drug benefit, 37% said they would not, and another 37% said they had not heard enough about the new benefit to decide. ■

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References: 1. Office of the Surgeon General. *Bone Health and Osteoporosis: A Surgeon General's Report: What Is Bone Disease?* Available at: [www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/bonehealth/factsheet1.html](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/bonehealth/factsheet1.html). Accessed November 19, 2004. Page 3. 2. *Bone Health and Osteoporosis: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Washington, DC: Office of the Surgeon General, US Dept of Health and Human Services; 2004:12.

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