



News Release

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

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DEADLINE APPROACHES FOR ONE MILLION CALIFORNIANS TO TRANSITION TO NEW FEDERAL PRESCRIPTION DRUG COVERAGE

State Officials Give Patients Tips to Ease Switch

SACRAMENTO – With just nine days left until Medicare drug coverage begins for nearly one million Medi-Cal beneficiaries who are enrolled in both programs, state health officials urge Medi-Cal patients to act now to ensure that the transition does not result in a temporary interruption in their drug coverage.

“Converting prescription drug benefits for over one million people in one day presents significant challenges,” said Stan Rosenstein, deputy director of Medical Care Services, California Department of Health Services. “Many of these beneficiaries have limited English-speaking skills and are physically or mentally disabled.”

Under terms of the federal Medicare Modernization Act, on Jan. 1 Medicare will begin providing drug coverage for these dual eligibles whose prescription drugs are currently paid by Medi-Cal. Last month, Medicare notified dual eligible beneficiaries about the plan they will be automatically enrolled in if they do not select one by Dec. 31. The automatic enrollment is intended to ensure no gap in drug coverage. If the plan does not meet their needs, dual eligibles can switch to another one at any time.

Rosenstein urged dual eligible beneficiaries to take the following steps now if they have not already done so:

1. Make a list of your medications.
2. Call 1-800-MEDICARE to find out which plan you have been enrolled in and whether the plan covers the drugs that you need.
3. To avoid a lapse in medication, ask your doctor for a 100-day refill of prescriptions before Dec. 31.
4. On your first visit to a pharmacy next year, bring your Medicare and Medi-Cal cards, a photo ID and be prepared to pay a drug co-pay of \$1 - \$3.
5. If the drug plan does not meet your needs, ask your doctor to contact the plan and ask the plan to approve the drugs that you need. If necessary, you can switch plans by calling 1-800-MEDICARE.

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California has taken a number of steps to ease the transition for beneficiaries from Medi-Cal to Medicare drug coverage.

- Gov. Schwarzenegger has invested more than \$100 million in the state budget for outreach, training, support and continuity of care.
- Medi-Cal will continue to cover classes of drugs that are excluded by Medicare, including benzodiazepines, barbiturates, over-the-counter medicines, cough and cold drugs and prescribed vitamins.
- Until Dec. 31, 2005, Medi-Cal beneficiaries enrolled in fee-for-service Medi-Cal or a County Organized Health System can get a 100-day prescription refill.
- Medi-Cal has sent to dual eligibles five letters in 12 languages, and is preparing to send one more that describes the upcoming transfer of drug coverage.
- Beginning Jan. 1, 2006, Medi-Cal will have a command center to troubleshoot problems, open Monday through Friday, 8 am – 8 pm.

The federal and state governments, public and private advocates, pharmacists and drug companies have been actively involved in collaborative outreach and education efforts over the past six months to remind seniors and disabled individuals of this switch and offer assistance to select a program that best meets their needs.

To assist with this transition, all Medicare plans will offer dual eligibles a one-time refill of their current medications even if they are not on the plan's formulary. Medicare has also established other safeguards to ensure that dual eligibles do not experience a lapse in drug coverage.

"If you have a relative, loved one or friend who is enrolled in both Medi-Cal and Medicare, please contact him or her today and offer to help with this transition," Rosenstein said.

Rosenstein's comments were made at a news conference today in Sacramento at which he was joined by Jeff Flick, Regional Administrator, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services; Lora Connolly, Director, California Department of Aging; and Don Gubbins, Rite Aid Regional Pharmacy Development Manager.

Beneficiaries who have questions about their coverage should call the toll-free, 24-hour Medicare hotline, 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227) or visit the Medicare Web site at <http://www.medicare.gov>.