

## How, when and where should I sign up for Medicare?

By: Dave Leo, President of WMI Mutual Insurance Company & WMI TPA

Medicare is the federal health insurance program for people age 65 and older and for certain people who are younger than age 65 with certain disabilities or with special medical conditions. There are two different types of Medicare coverage: (1) Original Medicare (which is often coupled with a private Medicare Supplement policy); and (2) Medicare Advantage (which is sold by private health insurance companies and bundles the three basic Medicare coverages (Part A ~ hospital, Part B ~ physicians/medical, and Part D ~ Rx)). For more information about these three Medicare “parts,” the coverage they provide, and their eligibility requirements, I would invite you to read my recent article that explains these things in greater detail.<sup>1</sup>

Where do I apply? According to the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) are in charge of the Medicare program, but Social Security processes applications and initiates Original Medicare enrollment.<sup>2</sup> This means when you apply for Medicare, you will be submitting your online application to the SSA through their online application portal at [ssa.gov/medicare](https://ssa.gov/medicare).

When should I apply? Some people get Medicare Part A and Part B automatically, but most people have to proactively sign up for those coverages. If you’re approaching age 65 and not already receiving benefits from Social Security or from the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB), you should contact the SSA about three months before your 65th birthday to sign up for Medicare. It is recommended that you sign up for Medicare even if you don’t plan to retire at age 65 since Part A is free (for pretty much everyone) and the additional coverage you get from having Medicare Part A (even while still actively working) offers extra financial protection.

In contrast to Medicare Part A which is premium free, Medicare Part B is voluntary and carries a monthly premium cost (\$175 in 2024). Importantly, you are only eligible to sign up for Part B during designated enrollment periods and if you don’t enroll in Part B when you’re first eligible for it, you may have to pay a late enrollment penalty that lasts for as long as you have Part B coverage (10% per 12-month delay). Also, your date of Medicare Part B enrollment determines your Part B effective date so enroll prior to your 65<sup>th</sup> birthday if you don’t want a gap in coverage.

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<sup>1</sup> [WMI-mutual.com/medigap/publications/pdf/2023/WN23\\_FallMagWMI-article0821.pdf](https://wmi-mutual.com/medigap/publications/pdf/2023/WN23_FallMagWMI-article0821.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Much of this information in this article comes from the federal Medicare pamphlet which can be found at [ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10043.pdf](https://ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10043.pdf).

Once you have signed up for Medicare Part A and Part B, you can either add a Medicare Supplement (aka Medigap) plan with a private insurance company (like WMI), or you can switch your Original Medicare to a Medicare Advantage (Part C) plan with a private insurance carrier. If you know you want to elect a Medicare Advantage plan when you first enroll, you simply need to choose your Advantage plan during your initial enrollment period (the three months before your Part B starts). If you decide down the road you want to move to an Advantage plan, you'll need to wait until the annual enrollment period (October 15 – December 7) and your Medicare Advantage coverage will be effective on January 1 of the new year.

### How do I apply?

Enrolling in Medicare Part A and Part B can be done online at [ssa.gov/medicare](https://ssa.gov/medicare). Keep in mind that even though the full retirement age for Social Security is no longer 65, you should sign up for Medicare Part A three months before your 65th birthday.

Finding a Medicare Advantage plan or a Medigap policy is a simple process using Medicare's plan compare tool at Medicare.gov. If you want to enroll in a Medicare Advantage Part C plan, navigate a browser to Medicare.gov and select the option to find a Medicare Advantage Plan. Once you find a plan you like, Medicare will walk you through the process to enroll in the plan of your choice. Finding a Medigap policy is done the same way except for the fact that once you find the Medicare Supplement policy and carrier you want, you'll need to contact that insurance company separately rather than through Medicare's website.

Signing up for Medicare Part D (prescription drug coverage) is quite simple. Navigate a browser to Medicare.gov and select the option to find a Medicare Part D drug plan. Enter your prescriptions and preferred pharmacies and the program will show you various plans, premium costs, deductibles and copayments/coinsurance costs. Select the plan you like and enroll right from the Medicare.gov website. You can enroll in a Medicare drug plan during your initial enrollment period when you are first eligible for Medicare and during the annual Medicare open enrollment period from October 15 – December 7. There are also special enrollment periods under certain circumstances. The entire process is pretty slick. One thing to note is that like Medicare Part B, prescription drug coverage is voluntary but if you don't enroll in a Part D drug plan when you are first eligible, you may wind up paying a late enrollment penalty forever (currently \$50 per year for each year of delay) so don't postpone enrolling in this valuable benefit.

### How can I learn more about Medicare and Medigap insurance policies?

If you have questions about Medicare and Medigap policies, I would invite you to contact our office for a free consultation. We are also happy to provide you a free copy of the CMS *Medicare & You* handbook or the SSA Medicare booklet. Finally, our website is full of useful information and links to helpful websites so take a minute to explore it at [wmimedigap.com](https://wmimedigap.com).