

Mysteries of Medicare: Special Enrollment Period for Five-Star Medicare Plans, and Other Plan-Rating Information for 2022

This newsletter will explain some Special Enrollment Periods (SEP) that are available to Medicare beneficiaries, and rating information for Medigap plans.

There is a Special Enrollment Period for Medicare plans with a five-star rating. This special enrollment would be for a Medicare Advantage Plan or a Medicare Prescription Part D Plan in your service area that has been awarded a rating of five stars. Medicare beneficiaries eligible to make this change must be enrolled currently in a stand-alone Prescription Drug Plan (PDP), Medicare Advantage Prescription Drug (MAPD) Plan, a Medicare Advantage (MA) Plan with no drug coverage, or, not in any plan at all. This special enrollment opportunity can be used once at any time between December 8, 2021, and November 30, 2022. It is even possible to leave your current five-star plan and join a different five-star plan. Enrollment changes are effective the first day of the month following the month you submit your enrollment request.

The star ratings of Medicare plans are awarded to plans based on member satisfaction surveys and health care provider comments. The rating system for Medicare Advantage Plans uses five key criteria in their assessment. The criteria helps evaluate how the members have access to preventive services; how often they receive treatment for long-term health conditions; overall satisfaction; number and type of complaints against the plan; quality of customer service. The ratings range from one to five stars, with five stars considered excellent. Medicare updates these ratings annually. The ratings can change from year to year.

There are risks involved in making one of these changes, however. Consideration must be given to any network changes, formulary changes and benefits of a five-star plan. The key is that you understand the benefits of the plan that you currently have, and the benefits of the five-star plan that you may be considering. It is possible to lose your prescription drug coverage if you unintentionally join a five-star Medicare Advantage Plan that does not include prescription drug coverage. In this case, you would have to wait until the next Open Enrollment Period to join a drug plan (starting October 15, 2022, with new plan effective January 1, 2023), and you may have to pay a late enrollment penalty for any months you were without Part D coverage.

If the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services notifies you that your current PDP or MAPD has failed to achieve at least a three-star rating for three years straight, you may switch to any four or five-star plan. The switch can be made any time during the year following notification and at any time the following year. This switch must go through 1-800-MEDICARE.

Medigap plans are not included in the five-star Medicare rating system. These plans are rated, but with different criteria, mostly dealing with financial stability, and by different agencies. There are several independent rating agencies, such as A.M Best Company and Standard and Poor's Insurance Rating Services. These rating agencies use letter grades to indicate a company's financial stability. The letters A++ or A+ show a superior financial rating for the company. PA MEDI counselors can help you find ratings for many of the companies that sell Medigap insurance.

For additional information and guidance through any changes with your Medicare plans, contact a PA MEDI (Pennsylvania Medicare Education, Decision and Insight) counselor in Chester County, through the Department of Aging; or call 1-800-MEDICARE. Star ratings for all Medicare plans are available on www.medicare.gov Plan Finder. PA MEDI counselors can also help you find these five-star plans in your service area.

To contact PA MEDI counselors, please call our general Help Line 610-344-5004, Option 2, and leave a message with your contact information. One of the counselors will return your call within one business day. PA MEDI counselors also provide free, confidential, unbiased assistance with most other Medicare situations, including enrollment in Medicare Parts A and B at any time throughout the year.