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MEDICARE

(FOR THE LAZY MAN)

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Medicare Drug Plans Selection Tutorial

By Douglas B. Jones, CLU, RHU · October 2026

Why do it yourself?

The best drug plan is the cheapest drug plan: the one that covers all of your prescription meds at the local pharmacies you prefer for the lowest possible cost. You can find it yourself in a short time on the government's own website, Medicare.gov/plan-compare.

The site asks for three things: your ZIP code, the prescription drugs you take, and the pharmacies you prefer to use. It then lists every stand-alone Prescription Drug Plan (PDP) in your area in order of total yearly cost, lowest first. That total includes the premium and what you will pay for your drugs at a pharmacy.

Agents are not paid to help people select drug plans, so reliable advice is difficult to find. You also know your own medications better than anyone else does. As the saying goes, garbage in, garbage out.

This tutorial covers the following process:

1. Starting your search
2. Building your drug list
3. Choosing your pharmacies
4. Comparing plans and picking the cheapest
5. Enrolling in that plan

Who needs this: anyone with a Medicare Supplement (Medigap) or another plan that lets you buy a separate drug plan. If you take no prescriptions at all, you should still enroll in the cheapest plan. That protects you from the possibility of a lifetime late enrollment penalty.

Use a real computer. A desktop or laptop works best. On a phone or some tablets, the screens look completely different. At least that has been my experience.

Before you start

You will be asked for the following details:

- **Your Medicare number.**
- **The full name of every prescription drug you take regularly.** For each one, you will be asked the exact name, the strength (for example, 20 mg tablet), the form (tablet, capsule, and so on), and how many you take in a month.

- **The names of one to five pharmacies** you would be willing to use. Include mail order if you would consider it.
- **Your Medicare.gov login,** if you have one. If not, you can make one, or you can search without it.

Part 1: Begin your search

1. Go to **www.medicare.gov/plan-compare**.
2. Decide whether to log in.
   - **Recommended:** click **Log in** under "Find Medicare Health & Drug Plans," or create an account. Your drug list and pharmacies are saved, so next time you can skip ahead, tweak your list, or try different choices.
   - **Or:** use the box on the right, "Don't have a Medicare account?"
3. If "COVERAGE FOR" appears, pick the preferred year for your search.
4. Type your home **ZIP code** and click **Continue**.
5. Under "Next, select the type of plan you want," click **Medicare drug plan (Part D)**. Then click **Find Plans**.
6. The site asks, "Do you get help with your Medicare health or drug costs?" Pick **I don't get help from any of these programs** and click **Continue**.
   - The four choices listed (Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, Medicare Savings Program, and Extra Help) are programs for people with very limited income. Ignoring these will avoid complicating the eventual results.
7. The site asks, "Do you want to see your drug costs to help you compare plans?"
   - **If you take no regular prescriptions:** pick **No** and click **Continue**. The site jumps straight to the list of plans, cheapest first. Enroll in the plan at the top of the list, then skip to Part 6.
   - **If you take prescriptions:** pick **Yes** and click **Continue**. Go on to Part 2.

Part 2: Build your drug list

This can be the most important step. The site contains a database and you will strive to locate your exact medication (or an acceptable substitute) within the drugs listed in that database. It can only price what you tell it, so take your time.

Repeat these steps for each drug you take:

1. On the "Add your drug" page, start typing the drug name in the box (for example, "ator" for atorvastatin). A drop-down list appears.
2. Click the correct name when it appears. Some drugs, like metformin, come in many combinations. Pick the exact one you take.
3. Click **Add**.
4. If a box says **"Your drug has a generic,"** choose **Add Generic** or **Keep Brand**. Pick the one you actually take or plan to take. Generics usually cost less.
5. On the "Add (drug name)" page, open the **Dosage** list and pick your strength and form (for example, "20mg tablet").
6. Enter the **Quantity** and **Frequency**. Calculate a one-month supply and use "Every month" whenever you can, even if you normally fill every 90 days. (See the note below.)
7. Check your entries and click **Add to My Drug List**.

8. On the “Review your drug list” page, click **Add Another Drug** and repeat until all of your drugs are on the list.
9. Review the finished list for accuracy and completeness. Use **Edit drug** or **Remove drug** to fix any mistakes.
10. Click the **print icon** in the upper right to keep a copy for your records.
11. Click **“Continue”**.

Why monthly? The site always starts its cost estimate on the 1st of next month. If you search in April, it assumes coverage starts May 1. If the months left in the year don’t divide evenly by three, quarterly refills throw off the math. Monthly refills give the most accurate yearly cost and any discounts realized when ordering a larger supply will be granted when you purchase, just not projected in this document.

Part 3: Choose your pharmacies

Pick one to five pharmacies. The more you add, the better your chance of finding the rock-bottom cost.

You are **not** committing to use these pharmacies. Each drug plan has its own network of “preferred” pharmacies with deeper discounts, plus its own mail-order service. This step simply lets the site price your drugs at several places.

1. **Ignore the “Your location” box.** The site already knows your ZIP code.
2. **Leave the “Pharmacy name” box empty** unless you can’t find a favorite in the list. A typo there can wipe out most of your choices.
3. Click the **Distance** filter to pick a wider circle (5, 10 or 25 miles), and click **Find Pharmacies**. This shows more potentially money saving options.
4. To price mail order, check **Add** next to **Mail-order Pharmacy** at the top of the list. Mail order is a great choice for anyone (like me) who hates shopping.
5. Scroll down and check **Add** next to each one you would consider, up to five in total. Use the page numbers at the bottom to see more.
6. Your choices appear in a bar across the bottom of the screen. When they look right, click **Continue**.

Part 4: Find the cheapest plan

The results page lists every drug plan in your area, cheapest first. The plan at the top is usually your answer.

1. **Check the sort order.** In the “Sort plans by” box, keep **Lowest drug + premium cost**. That figure is what matters: the premium plus every copay you pay at the pharmacy.
2. **Ignore the filters.** Don’t filter by insurance carrier or star rating. Dropping a carrier can remove the cheapest plan. Star ratings mostly reflect pharmacy service, not plan quality.
3. **Read the top plan’s box.** Each plan shows:
   - **Name and Plan ID** (for example, “Wellcare Value Script (PDP), S4802-156-0”)
   - **Monthly premium**

- **Total drug & premium cost** for the rest of the year, at a retail pharmacy and by mail order. This is the number to watch.
- **Deductible.** The government sets the maximum each year, but plans often don't apply it to every drug.

4. **Pick your finalists.** Check **Add to compare** on the top two or three plans. Three is the most the site allows for the comparison display.
5. Click **Compare** at the bottom of the screen.

Part 5: Compare side by side and choose

The comparison page shows your finalists in columns. For each plan, it lists the projected yearly cost at every pharmacy you picked.

1. Under **Drug coverage & costs**, check that each plan covers all of your drugs (for example, "3 of 3 prescription drugs covered"). If a plan says "Restrictions may apply," click it to see the details.
2. Look at the **Total drug + premium cost** under each pharmacy. Each dollar figure assumes you fill every prescription at that pharmacy for the rest of the year.
3. Find the lowest figure on the page. The plan and pharmacy where it appears are your best deal.
4. Click the **print icon** to save a copy of the comparison.
5. Click **See Plan Details** if you want the full multi-page report. It is worth a look if your drug needs are complicated.
6. Before leaving this step, select the plan in which you wish to enroll.

Part 6: Enroll in your plan

The hard part is over. The application takes a short time and is very straightforward once the first question is answered correctly.

Start the application

1. On the comparison page, click **Enroll** under the plan you chose.
2. A box opens that says "You're joining" with the plan name and Plan ID. Check that it is the right plan, then click **Join Plan**.
3. **Choose your enrollment period.** Scroll down and check the box that fits you. Most people use one of these three:
   - **New to Medicare:** "I'm new to Medicare" (turning 65 or just got Part A and/or B)
   - **Leaving an employer or union plan:** "I left coverage from my employer or union (including COBRA coverage)." Enter the date that coverage ends.
   - **Annual Election Period (October 15 to December 7):** you are switching plans for next year. The new plan starts January 1.

   If none of these fits, see the section on enrollment periods below. Then click **Next**.

Fill in your information

4. **Medicare number:** copy it from your red, white and blue Medicare card. You can also find it on a benefit verification letter or in your Social Security account online. Dashes are optional. Medicare numbers never use the letters B, I, L, O, S or Z, so a character that looks like one of those is a number.
5. Check **“I’ve read and understand the contents of this page”** and click **Next**.
6. **Personal information:** enter your legal name and your real date of birth.
7. Select your sex and enter your phone number as one string of digits, with no dashes, dots or parentheses.
8. **Ethnicity and race:** these questions are optional. To keep it simple, check **“I choose not to answer”** for each. Click **Next**.
9. **Permanent residence:** enter your home street address. P.O. boxes are not allowed. Make sure mail reaches this address, because your ID card and policy documents come by mail. If your mailing address is different, check that box and add it. Click **Next**.
10. **Other drug coverage:** if you are keeping other drug coverage on top of this plan, answer **Yes**. That could be from an employer, other private insurance, TRICARE, the VA, a state assistance program, or the Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program. Otherwise answer **No**. You can skip the optional questions on this screen and the next one. Click **Next**.
11. **Paying your premium:** if you collect Social Security or Railroad Retirement benefits, you can have the premium deducted from your check. Setup can take up to three months, so pay any bills the plan sends in the meantime. If you don’t collect benefits yet, choose **“I want the plan to bill me each month.”** You can change it later. Click **Next**.

Sign and submit

12. **Plan agreement:** read the statements and check **“I’ve read and agree to these statements.”**
13. Under “Who is the person completing this application?”, choose **“I am the person joining the plan (or I am helping the person join the plan).”** Only choose the other option if you hold a power of attorney or similar legal authority for the person enrolling. Click **Next**.
14. **Review & submit:** double-check every answer on this screen. Use **Edit** to fix anything that’s wrong.
15. Check the box confirming you understand, then click **Submit**.

After you submit

16. The screen says “You’re all set. Your application is with the plan.” It shows a **confirmation number**. Click **Print This Page** and keep the printout. You’ll need that number if a problem ever comes up.
17. Expect your welcome letter, policy documents and ID card in the mail. If you haven’t heard from the plan within 10 days, call the plan using the phone number on the confirmation page.
18. Click **Done**.

When you can enroll, and the penalty for waiting

You can only join, switch or drop a drug plan during certain windows, called enrollment periods.

Enrollment period	When	Coverage starts
Initial Enrollment (new to Medicare)	3 months before through 3 months after the month you get Medicare	When Medicare starts, if you apply early. Otherwise, the 1st of the month after the plan gets your request.
Annual Election Period (open enrollment)	October 15 to December 7 every year	January 1 of next year
Special Enrollment (life changes)	Usually 2 months after the event: losing employer or union coverage, moving, getting Medicaid or Extra Help, and others	Usually the 1st of the month after the plan gets your request

The lifetime late enrollment penalty. If you go 63 days or more without a drug plan or other "creditable" drug coverage after you become eligible, you pay a penalty for as long as you have a drug plan. Creditable coverage is coverage at least as good as Medicare's, such as an employer or union plan, TRICARE or the VA.

The penalty is 1% of the national base beneficiary premium for every month you went without coverage. That works out to about 40 cents for each month you were late, added to your monthly premium forever:

- 1 year late: about $4.80 a month
- 2 years late: about $9.60 a month
- 3 years late: about $14.40 a month

The base premium changes every year, so the penalty does too. Enrolling in the cheapest plan on time, even with no prescriptions, keeps you clear of it.

Shop again every October. Plans change their prices, drug lists and pharmacy networks every year. The cheapest plan this year may not be the cheapest next year. Each fall, your plan mails an Annual Notice of Change (ANOC), and most people never read it. Repeat this search after October 1 and enroll by December 7. Your new plan starts January 1.

Common mistakes to avoid

- Picking a plan by its premium alone. A $0-premium plan can cost more in copays. Always go by **Lowest drug + premium cost**.
- Entering the wrong strength or form of a drug, or quarterly refills. Garbage in, garbage out.
- Filtering out carriers or going by star ratings.
- Choosing only one pharmacy, which hides potentially cheaper options.
- Skipping the printout of your confirmation number.

Need a hand? Medicare answers questions at 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227). For free advice from Douglas B. Jones, CLU, RHU, visit MedicareForTheLazyMan.com and send the short questionnaire, or email DBJ@M4TLM.com.