

Choosing a Medicare Drug Plan More of a Challenge for Seniors than Using One

Sixty percent of seniors enrolled in a Medicare drug plan agree that they've had difficulty choosing a plan, while one in four agree that it has been hard to use

A new Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive Health-Care Poll shows that majorities of seniors who have enrolled in a Medicare drug plan somewhat or strongly agree that it is or has been difficult to choose a plan (60%) and to understand the benefits (53%). However, once they have enrolled, only one in four (26%) has found the plan difficult to use. Furthermore, the creation of the new Medicare drug benefit gets strong approval ratings from most U.S. adults and seniors, as does the subsidy for lower-income seniors that reduces their out-of-pocket costs by lowering their monthly premiums for the drug benefit and lowering co-payments for prescription drugs.

These are some of the results of a Harris Interactive online survey of 2,477 U.S. adults conducted between February 7 and 9, 2006 for The Wall Street Journal Online's Health Industry Edition.

Public support in relation to the Medicare reform bill

Strong support among U.S. adults and seniors exists for three parts of the Medicare reform bill mentioned in the survey, while a fourth part that deals with prohibiting the importation of less expensive drugs from Canada receives little support.

- Two-thirds of adults (66%) and seniors (65%) say they somewhat or strongly approve of a plan to help insurance and managed care plans to compete with traditional Medicare.
- Eight in 10 adults (79%) and seniors (79%) say they somewhat or strongly approve of a prescription drug benefit for those on Medicare starting in 2006.
- Most adults (89%) and seniors (93%) somewhat or strongly approve of a subsidy for lower-income seniors to reduce their out-of-pocket costs by lowering their monthly premiums for the drug benefit and lowering co-payments for prescription drugs.
- In contrast, little support exists for a law which prohibits importing less expensive drugs from Canada as only one in five adults (20%) and seniors (20%) say they somewhat or strongly approve, which may explain why only minorities of all adults (27%) and seniors (36%) say they are somewhat or very pleased that the 2003 Medicare bill passed.

Choosing a Medicare prescription drug plan

When considering the different options that might be available to them when choosing a Medicare prescription drug plan, more than four in ten (42%) seniors say that the cost of co-pays and deductibles they would pay for prescription drugs is most important to them. This increases to 57 percent among those seniors who are already enrolled in a Medicare drug plan. Fewer seniors say the cost of the monthly premium they would pay (27%) and the choices of prescription drugs that are covered by the plan (16%) are most important to them.

Perceptions of Medicare drug plans

A majority (58%) of adults aged 18 to 64 with an immediate family member enrolled in a Medicare drug plan somewhat or strongly agree that it is or has been difficult for their family member to understand the plan's benefits. Furthermore, substantial numbers somewhat or strongly agree that it is or has been difficult for their family member to choose (50%) and use (42%) a plan. Some of these perceived difficulties may stem from the fact that 45 percent of these adults also somewhat or strongly agree that their family member has had trouble reaching anyone who can answer questions about the benefit plan.

TABLE 1

Pleased or Disappointed with New Medicare Bill

"In 2003, the Congress passed a new Medicare bill that includes a new prescription drug benefit. Which of the following best describes how you feel about the Medicare bill?"

Base: All Adults

	All Adults			Age 65+			Seniors in Medicare Drug Plan
	Feb. 2004	June 2005	Feb. 2006	Feb. 2004	June 2005	Feb. 2006	Feb. 2006
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Pleased (NET)	21	38	27	26	34	36	50
I am very pleased that it passed	9	17	11	8	12	17	30
I am somewhat pleased that it passed	12	21	16	18	22	19	20
Disappointed (NET)	25	18	26	41	32	38	28
I am somewhat disappointed that it passed	9	8	8	14	14	14	13
I am very disappointed that it passed	16	10	19	27	18	24	15
Not sure/don't know enough about it to have an opinion (NET)	55	44	46	32	34	27	22
Don't know	12	6	10	12	4	9	13
Don't know enough about it to have an opinion	43	38	36	20	30	16	9

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

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TABLE 2

Approve/Disapprove of Helping Insurers to Compete with Traditional Medicare

"How do you feel about the following four pieces of the bill?"

(1) A plan to help insurance and managed care plans to compete with traditional Medicare

Base: Those who "know enough to have an opinion" (i.e., 54% of all adults)

	All Adults	Adults 50 - 64	Adults 65+	Seniors in Medicare Drug Plan
	%	%	%	%
Approve Strongly/Somewhat (NET)	66	66	65	69
Approve strongly	28	33	26	26
Approve somewhat	37	33	39	44
Disapprove Strongly/Somewhat (NET)	34	34	35	31
Disapprove somewhat	18	16	20	20
Disapprove strongly	17	18	16	10

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 3

Approve/Disapprove of Ban on Importing Less Expensive Drugs

"How do you feel about the four following pieces of the bill?"

(2) A law which prohibits importing less expensive drugs from Canada

Base: Those who "know enough to have an opinion" (i.e., 54% of all adults)

	All Adults	Adults 50 - 64	Adults 65+	Seniors in Medicare Drug Plan
	%	%	%	%
Approve Strongly/Somewhat (NET)	20	17	20	27
Approve strongly	10	8	8	5
Approve somewhat	10	9	12	22
Disapprove Strongly/Somewhat (NET)	80	83	80	73
Disapprove somewhat	21	25	14	11
Disapprove strongly	59	58	66	62

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

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TABLE 4

Approve/Disapprove of Prescription Drug Benefit

“How do you feel about the following four pieces of the bill?”

(3) Prescription drug benefit for people on Medicare starting in 2006

Base: Those who “know enough to have an opinion” (i.e., 54% of all adults)

	All Adults	Adults 50 - 64	Adults 65+	Seniors in Medicare Drug Plan
	%	%	%	%
Approve Strongly/Somewhat (NET)	79	83	79	80
Approve strongly	48	55	50	60
Approve somewhat	31	28	29	21
Disapprove Strongly/Somewhat (NET)	21	17	21	20
Disapprove somewhat	12	8	11	8
Disapprove strongly	9	9	10	11

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 5

Approve/Disapprove of Subsidy for Lower-Income Seniors

“How do you feel about the following four pieces of the bill?”

(4) A subsidy for lower-income seniors to reduce their out-of-pocket costs by lowering their monthly premiums for the drug benefit and lowering co-payments for prescription drugs

Base: Those who “know enough to have an opinion” (i.e., 54% of all adults)

	All Adults	Adults 50 - 64	Adults 65+	Seniors in Medicare Drug Plan
	%	%	%	%
Approve Strongly/Somewhat (NET)	89	87	93	94
Approve strongly	60	68	59	67
Approve somewhat	29	19	34	27
Disapprove Strongly/Somewhat (NET)	11	13	7	6
Disapprove somewhat	6	7	5	4
Disapprove strongly	4	6	2	2

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

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TABLE 6

Factors That Matter When Choosing a Prescription Drug Plan

“When considering the different options that might be available to you when choosing a Medicare prescription drug plan, which of the following is most important to you personally?”

Base: Adults aged 65 and older

	Adults 65+		Seniors in a Medicare Drug Plan
	Oct. 2005	Feb. 2006	
	%	%	%
The cost of the co-pays and deductibles you would pay for prescription drugs	40	42	57
The cost of the monthly premium you would pay	32	27	24
The choice of prescription drugs that are covered by the plan	18	16	14
The network of pharmacies that you could use to fill your prescription	3	3	4
Something else	8	12	2

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 7

Enrollees’ Perceptions of Medicare Drug Plans

“How do you feel about the following statements regarding the new Medicare drug plan?”

Base: Seniors enrolled in Medicare Drug Plan

		Agree (NET)	Agree Strongly	Some-what Agree	Disagree (NET)	Some-what Disagree	Disagree Strongly	Not Sure
It will decrease health-care costs for seniors	%	53	27	26	30	16	14	17
It is/has been difficult for me to choose a plan	%	60	25	35	38	11	27	2
It is/has been difficult for me to understand the benefits	%	63	37	26	36	11	24	1
It is/has been difficult for me to use the plan	%	26	16	10	61	17	44	14
I had trouble reaching anyone who can answer questions about the benefit plan	%	37	22	15	60	22	38	3
I don’t see any benefit for seniors	%	37	18	19	56	19	37	8

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

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TABLE 8

Family Members' Perceptions of Medicare Drug Plans

"How do you feel about the following statements regarding the new Medicare drug plan?"

Base: Adults aged 18 to 64 with an immediate family member who is enrolled in a Medicare Drug Plan

		Agree (NET)	Agree Strongly	Some-what Agree	Disagree (NET)	Some-what Disagree	Disagree Strongly	Not Sure
It will decrease health-care costs for seniors	%	36	12	24	35	17	18	29
It is/has been difficult for my family member to choose a plan	%	50	25	26	23	14	8	27
It is/has been difficult for my family member to understand the benefits	%	58	32	26	20	12	8	22
It is/has been difficult for my family member to use the plan	%	42	19	23	28	17	11	30
My family member had trouble reaching anyone who can answer questions about the benefit plan	%	45	25	20	21	15	7	34
I don't see any benefit for seniors	%	34	17	17	42	22	20	24

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

Downloadable PDFs of Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive Health-Care Polls are posted at http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters_wsj.asp.

Methodology:

Harris Interactive conducted this online survey within the United States between February 7 and 9, 2006 among a national cross section of 2,477 adults, ages 18 years and over. Figures for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, income and region were weighted where necessary to align with population proportions. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

In theory, with probability samples of this size, one could say with 95 percent certainty that the overall results have a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points of what they would be if the entire U.S. adult population had been polled with complete accuracy. Sampling error for the following sub-sample

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results: adults aged 65 and over (377); adults aged 65 and over who are enrolled in a Medicare drug plan (119); adults aged 18 to 64 with a family member who is enrolled in a Medicare drug plan (697); and all adults (1,286), those aged 50-64 (360), those aged 65 and over (293), and those who are enrolled in a Medicare drug plan (103) who know enough about the Medicare bill to have an opinion about it is higher and varies. Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. This includes refusals to be interviewed (nonresponse), question wording and question order, and weighting. It is impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors. This online sample is not a probability sample.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

About the Survey

The Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive Health-Care Poll is an exclusive poll that is published in the award-winning Health Industry Edition of The Wall Street Journal Online at www.wsj.com/health.

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