



BenefitsNerds

Medicare 101 Roadmap

Your Peace-of-Mind Guide

2026 edition • every figure is for plan year 2026

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Welcome to Peace of Mind

This ebook is designed to transform a complex topic into a clear, step-by-step journey. You'll learn what Medicare is, determine your eligibility, and match options to your lifestyle, budget, and long-term goals. We'll also guide you through enrollment timelines, common myths, and practical next steps so you can choose confidently and protect your health and finances.

What Is Medicare?

Medicare is a government-sponsored health insurance program for people meeting certain eligibility requirements. It's designed to provide healthcare coverage for:

- People age 65 and older
- People under 65 with certain disabilities
- People with End-Stage Renal Disease

Understanding the basics helps you compare coverage paths, estimate costs, and plan for the future.

Are You Eligible?

You or your spouse must have worked a minimum of 10 years (40 quarters) according to Medicare guidelines. Qualifying events include:

- Turning age 65
- Going on Disability (after 2 years)
- Coming off Group coverage (working past age 65)
- End-stage renal disease

If you aren't sure whether your work history qualifies, request your earnings record from Social Security or speak with a licensed Medicare professional.

Medicare and Me: Fit It to Your Life

How Medicare Fits Into My Lifestyle

Understanding Medicare starts with understanding YOUR unique situation:

Your Health Status

How is your overall health? What medications do you take?

Your Lifestyle

Do you travel often? Do you have a preferred doctor?

Your Budget

What monthly premium works for you?

Your Future

What might your healthcare needs look like in 5–10 years?

Tip

Write down your priorities in order—doctor access, travel, premium, and predictability—so plan comparisons stay focused on what matters most to you.

The 3 E's: Your Medicare Journey

1

EDUCATE Yourself on Medicare Options

Learn about the different parts of Medicare and what they cover.

2

EVALUATE Your Current Situation

Consider your health, budget, and lifestyle needs.

3

EMPOWER Your Decision

Make an informed choice that's right for YOU.

Throughout this guide, you'll see how each E builds on the last to create clarity and confidence.

Understanding the Medicare Alphabet

Medicare is organized into parts that each cover different healthcare needs. Use this section as a quick reference while you compare options and estimate monthly and annual costs.

Part A

Hospital Insurance

What it covers	Inpatient hospital care, skilled nursing facility, hospice, limited home health care
Provider type	Original Medicare
Premium	Free for most (if 40+ work quarters)

Part B

Medical Insurance

What it covers	Doctor visits, outpatient services, preventive care, durable medical equipment
Provider type	Original Medicare
Premium	Monthly premium (based on income) — \$202.90 standard in 2026

Part C **Medicare Advantage**

What it covers	All-in-one plan combining Part A, B (often D), sometimes vision, dental, hearing
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Provider type	Private Insurance Company
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Premium	May have additional premium on top of Part B
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Part D **Prescription Drug Plan**

What it covers	Prescription drugs (varies by plan and formulary)
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Provider type	Private Insurance Company
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Premium	Monthly premium (varies by plan)
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Your Two Medicare Routes

Route 1: Original Medicare + Supplements

Part A (Hospital) + Part B (Medical)



Add Medicare Supplement (Medigap)



Add Part D (Prescription Drugs)

Route 2: Medicare Advantage

Part A (Hospital) + Part B (Medical)



Choose Medicare Advantage (Part C)

Often includes prescription drugs

Both paths can work well—the best choice depends on doctor access, predictability, travel, and budget.

Original Medicare Breakdown: Part A

Part A – Hospital Insurance

Premium

- **\$0/month** for most people (if you or spouse paid Medicare taxes for 40+ quarters)
- **\$311/month** if you paid taxes for 30–39 quarters
- **\$565/month** if you paid taxes for less than 30 quarters

Hospital Stay Costs

- **\$1,736** deductible per benefit period
- Days 1–60: **\$0** coinsurance
- Days 61–90: **\$434** coinsurance per day
- Days 91–150: **\$868** per “Lifetime Reserve Day”
- Customer responsible for costs after 150 days

Skilled Nursing

- **\$217** per day copay for days 21–100

These amounts are subject to annual updates; always verify current figures with Medicare.gov.

Source: CMS, 2026 Medicare Parts A & B Premiums and Deductibles.

Original Medicare Breakdown: Part B

Part B – Medical Insurance

\$202.90/month

Standard premium in 2026

Out-of-Pocket Costs

- Annual deductible: **\$283**
- Coinsurance: **20%** for most covered services after deductible
- Excess charges: The difference between what your doctor charges and the Medicare-approved amount

Payment Options

- Automatic deduction from Social Security check (if receiving benefits)
- Quarterly billing (if not on Social Security)
- Monthly online payments through your Medicare.gov account
- Medicare Easy Pay (automatic monthly draft)

If your providers accept Medicare assignment, you will not face excess charges.

Source: CMS, 2026 Medicare Parts A & B Premiums and Deductibles.

Choosing Between Advantage and Supplement

Which Fits My Lifestyle Now and Into the Future

Medicare Supplement (Medigap) + Part D

Best For

- People who want to see ANY doctor that accepts Medicare
- Frequent travelers
- Those who prefer predictable costs
- People who want comprehensive coverage

Pros

- ✓ Nationwide coverage
- ✓ No network restrictions
- ✓ Minimal out-of-pocket costs after premium
- ✓ Great for travelers

Cons

- ✗ Higher monthly premiums
- ✗ Must purchase Part D separately
- ✗ No extra benefits (dental, vision, hearing)

Medicare Advantage (Part C)

Best For

- People comfortable with network restrictions
- Those who want extra benefits (dental, vision, hearing)
- Budget-conscious beneficiaries
- People who don't travel extensively

Pros

- ✓ Lower monthly premiums
- ✓ Extra benefits included (dental, vision, hearing, fitness, transportation)
- ✓ Prescription drugs often included
- ✓ Annual out-of-pocket maximum for protection

Cons

- ✗ Network limitations (HMO/PPO)
- ✗ May need referrals
- ✗ Limited coverage when traveling
- ✗ Copays for services

Quick Comparison Chart

Feature	Original + Medigap	Medicare Advantage
Doctors	Any that take Medicare	Network (HMO/PPO)
Prescription Drugs	Add Part D separately	Often included
Monthly Costs	Higher premium, lower out-of-pocket	Lower premium, copays apply
Travel	Good for U.S. travel	Limited to plan area
Extra Benefits	Not included	Often includes dental, vision, hearing
Predictability	Very predictable	Variable based on usage

Medicare Supplement Plans Explained: Plan G

What Plan G Covers

- ✓ Part A coinsurance and hospital costs (365 additional days)
- ✓ Part B coinsurance (20% – covered 100%)
- ✓ Part A deductible (\$1,736 – covered)
- ✓ Part B excess charges (15% – covered)
- ✓ Foreign travel emergency (80% up to plan limits)

What You Pay

- Part B deductible (\$283 annually) – NOT covered
- Monthly Medigap premium
- Part B premium (\$202.90)

Plan G offers strong protection against large, unexpected bills while leaving only the Part B deductible as your primary annual expense beyond premiums.

Source: CMS, 2026 Medicare Parts A & B Premiums and Deductibles.

Keeping Your Doctor and Navigating Networks

"How do I keep my doctor when moving into Medicare?"

With Original Medicare + Medigap

- ✓ See ANY doctor who accepts Medicare (most do)
- ✓ No referrals needed
- ✓ No network restrictions
- ✓ Keep your doctor when traveling

With Medicare Advantage

- Check if your doctor is in the plan's network
- Confirm they're accepting new Medicare Advantage patients
- Understand referral requirements for specialists
- Consider what happens when you travel

Important Question to Ask Your Doctor

"Do you accept [specific Medicare Advantage plan name]?"

Call the practice directly, verify the exact plan name and network, and re-check each AEP because networks can change year to year.

Enrollment Windows and Timing

When Can I Enroll? Original Medicare Enrollment Periods

1 Initial Enrollment Period (IEP)

- 7-month period around your 65th birthday
- 3 months before your birthday month
- Your birthday month
- 3 months after your birthday month

2 Special Enrollment Period (SEP)

- 8-month period after employment/group coverage ends
- No penalty if you had creditable coverage

3 General Enrollment Period

- January 1 – March 31 annually
- Coverage begins the month after you sign up
- May include late enrollment penalties

Medicare Supplement Enrollment

1

Open Enrollment (Best Time!)

- 6-month period starting when you're 65+ AND enrolled in Part B
- Guaranteed acceptance – no health questions
- Best rates available

2

Anytime During the Year

- May require medical underwriting
- May cost more
- Not guaranteed acceptance

3

Guaranteed Issue Rights

- Special situations where you have guaranteed acceptance
- Examples: losing employer coverage, Medicare Advantage plan leaving area

Medicare Advantage Enrollment

1

Initial Enrollment Period

- Same 7-month period as Original Medicare

2

Annual Enrollment Period (AEP)

- October 15 – December 7 each year
- Switch plans or return to Original Medicare
- Changes effective January 1

3

Open Enrollment Period (OEP)

- January 1 – March 31
- For existing Medicare Advantage members only
- One-time plan change allowed
- Changes effective first of following month

4

Special Enrollment Period

- When losing employer coverage
- Moving out of service area
- Other qualifying events

Priorities, Budgets, and Extra Benefits

What's Most Important to You?

Consider these factors when choosing your Medicare path:

Keeping Your Current Doctor

If this is priority #1, verify network acceptance before choosing.

Having Extras Like Vision and Dental Coverage

Medicare Advantage plans often include these; Medigap does not.

Avoiding Unexpected Costs

Medigap offers more predictable costs; Medicare Advantage has an out-of-pocket maximum.

Paying a Lower Premium

Medicare Advantage usually has lower monthly premiums.

Nationwide Coverage

Medigap offers true nationwide coverage; important for travelers.

Use a worksheet to rank these priorities and note any non-negotiables.

Additional Considerations and Cost Adjustments

Income-Related Monthly Adjustment Amount (IRMAA)

If your income exceeds certain thresholds, you'll pay higher premiums for Part B and Part D.

Higher premiums apply if your modified adjusted gross income is:

- Individual: Over **\$109,000**
- Married filing jointly: Over **\$218,000**

The higher your income, the higher your premium surcharge. You can appeal IRMAA if your income has dropped due to a qualifying life event (retirement, marriage change).

Source: CMS, 2026 Medicare Parts A & B Premiums and Deductibles.

Medicare and Health Savings Accounts (HSA)

Important: You can no longer contribute to an HSA once you enroll in any part of Medicare (A or B).

- Stop HSA contributions 6 months before applying for Social Security
- You can still use existing HSA funds for qualified medical expenses

Limited Income? There's Help!

Extra Help Program

Helps pay Medicare prescription drug costs for those with limited income and resources.

Medicaid

Provides health coverage for eligible low-income Americans. Eligibility varies by state.

Contact Information

- Medicare: 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)
- Social Security: 1-800-772-1213
- Your State Medicaid Office

Common Medicare Myths—Busted

MYTH

“Everything I see on TV is true”

Reality: TV commercials are often misleading and designed to entice you to call. Always verify information with licensed agents or official Medicare resources.

MYTH

“Medicare covers everything”

Reality: Original Medicare has gaps in coverage, including:

- No prescription drug coverage
- No dental, vision, or hearing coverage
- 20% coinsurance on Part B services
- No out-of-pocket maximum

MYTH

“I can’t afford Medicare”

Reality: Many options exist for different budgets, and assistance programs are available for those with limited income.

MYTH

“I can change my mind anytime”

Reality: Enrollment periods are specific. Missing them can result in penalties and delayed coverage.

Your Medicare Checklist

3 Months Before Turning 65

- ☐ Determine if you need to enroll in Part A & B
- ☐ Research Medicare Supplement vs. Medicare Advantage
- ☐ Check if your current doctors accept Medicare
- ☐ Review your prescription drug needs

At 65

- ☐ Enroll in Medicare Part A & B (if not automatically enrolled)
- ☐ Choose between Medigap + Part D OR Medicare Advantage
- ☐ Enroll in chosen supplemental coverage during Open Enrollment

After Enrollment

- ☐ Receive your Medicare card
- ☐ Receive your supplemental insurance cards
- ☐ Confirm coverage with doctors and pharmacies
- ☐ Set up payment methods

Annually (October 15 – December 7)

- ☐ Review your current coverage
- ☐ Compare available plans
- ☐ Make changes if needed during Annual Enrollment

Pro Tip

Keep a one-page summary of your plan ID numbers, premiums, drug list, and key contacts in your wallet and share a copy with a trusted family member.

What Happens Next?

1 Enroll in Original Medicare

Part A (Hospital) + Part B (Medical). You'll pay:

- Part B Premium (\$202.90/month standard)
- Deductibles (\$283 Part B, \$1,736 Part A)
- 20% coinsurance on Part B services

2 Choose Your Path

Option A: Add Medicare Supplement + Part D

- Choose a Medigap plan
- Add a Part D prescription drug plan
- Pay monthly premiums for both

Option B: Choose Medicare Advantage

- Select a Medicare Advantage plan
- Prescription drugs often included
- Pay plan premium (if any) plus Part B

3 Review Your Selections

- Annual and monthly costs
- Doctors and facilities covered
- Prescription drugs covered
- Extra benefits included

How to Enroll

For Original Medicare

1. **Online:** Visit ssa.gov/medicare/sign-up
2. **Phone:** Call Social Security at 1-800-772-1213
3. **In-Person:** Visit your local Social Security office (find locations at [SSA.gov](https://ssa.gov))

For Supplemental Coverage

1. Contact your current health insurer about their Medicare solutions
2. Call a licensed Medicare broker for personalized assistance
3. Compare plans online through [Medicare.gov](https://medicare.gov)

Important Contacts and Red Flags

Important Phone Numbers

MEDICARE HOTLINE

1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

SOCIAL SECURITY

1-800-772-1213

Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.–7 p.m.

MEDICARE.GOV

medicare.gov

Official government website for Medicare information

Red Flags to Watch For

Unsolicited Calls or Visits

Medicare will never call you unsolicited. Be wary of agents who show up unannounced.

High-Pressure Sales Tactics

Take your time. You should never feel rushed into a decision.

“Free” Offers Requiring Personal Information

Never give your Medicare number to someone who calls you.

Claims That Sound Too Good to Be True

If someone promises Medicare benefits that seem unrealistic, they probably are.

Switching Plans Without Understanding Why

Make sure you understand what you’re giving up before making changes.

Smart Questions to Ask and Retirement Planning

Questions to Ask Before Choosing

About Coverage

- ☐ Are my doctors and hospitals in-network?
- ☐ Are my prescriptions covered, and what do they cost?
- ☐ What are my out-of-pocket costs for common services?
- ☐ Is there an out-of-pocket maximum?

About Costs

- ☐ What's the total monthly premium?
- ☐ What are the copays for doctor visits, specialists, and ER visits?
- ☐ What's the deductible?
- ☐ Are there any extra charges I should know about?

About Flexibility

- ☐ Can I see specialists without a referral?
- ☐ What happens if I travel?
- ☐ Can I switch plans if my needs change?

Planning for Retirement Healthcare

How Do You Plan to Spend Retirement?

Traveling

Consider nationwide coverage

Time with Family

Ensure coverage in multiple locations

Gardening/Hobbies

Budget for routine care

Not Ready to Think About It Yet

Start now to avoid penalties!

Medicare decisions impact your retirement quality of life and budget. Choose wisely! Tie your plan choice to your likely care usage: routine preventive services, specialist access, prescriptions, and potential hospitalizations.

Final Thoughts and Next Steps

Remember the 3 E's

1 EDUCATE yourself on all your options

- Don't rush the process
- Understand the differences between plans
- Know your enrollment periods

2 EVALUATE your personal situation

- Consider your health status
- Think about your lifestyle
- Review your budget
- Plan for the future

3 EMPOWER your decision

- Make an informed choice
- Ask questions until you're comfortable
- Work with a trusted advisor
- Review annually

Ready to Take the Next Step?

Medicare doesn't have to be confusing. With the right information and guidance, you can make confident decisions about your healthcare coverage.

Book your free personal Medicare review

A free one-on-one with Joel Carter on Zoom, about an hour. No obligation to enroll in a plan.

Book a time



Scan with your phone camera

OR TYPE THIS ADDRESS

benefitsnerds.cal.com/joelc/one-on-one

Get Help and Free Resources

Need Help?

PHONE

(708) 960-8401

EMAIL

joelc@benefitsnerds.com

WEBSITE

benefitsnerds.com

We can help you

- Compare plans side-by-side
- Understand your costs
- Verify doctor and hospital coverage
- Enroll in the right coverage for YOU
- Answer all your Medicare questions

Download Our Free Resources

- Medicare Enrollment Checklist
- Plan Comparison Worksheet
- Doctor Coverage Verification Form
- Prescription Drug Cost Calculator
- Medicare Glossary of Terms

Disclaimer

Benefits Nerds is not affiliated with or endorsed by the U.S. government or the federal Medicare program. We are a licensed insurance agency. We may offer Medicare Advantage and/or Prescription Drug Plans. This is a solicitation for insurance.

For a complete listing of plans available in your area, please contact 1-800-MEDICARE or visit www.medicare.gov.

Consent to Contact: By submitting your information, you agree that a licensed insurance agent or one of our marketing partners may contact you via phone, text, or email (including by automated technology and prerecorded messages) to discuss your options. Your consent is not a condition of purchase. You may opt out at any time.

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