Living 50 Plus

It's Time to Review, Renew Medicare

This is that time of year, again, when we need to make decisions about Medicare plans.

From Oct. 15 to Dec. 7, we are eligible to compare our coverage between the original Medicare, Advantage plans and the Part D drug plans in open enrollment. They change every year, and we need to know how those changes will impact us.

To compare plans, go online to Medicare.gov and click on Preview 2022 Health & Drug Plans. Click on the plans you'd like to see and enter your ZIP code. If you want to compare drug costs, enter that data as well.

Have pen and paper on hand and do the math. While it's said that the average Advantage plan will come down $2, the average drug plan will go up that much. Beware the deductibles.

If you have an Advantage plan and think you want to continue it, read the fine print. If you're used to having benefits for glasses, gym membership or other things, check to be sure you'll still have those. Compare all of the plans to get what you need.

If you have a Part D drug plan and need insulin, be especially careful in selecting your plan. An additional 500 plans will include insulin this year, but again, read the fine print to be sure it's what you need. A warning: Be sure your drugs are covered.

If you have questions you can call 1-800-MEDICARE, 24/7, to get help. You can also seek assistance at the State Health Insurance Program (SHIP) for your state (www.shiphelp.org).

If you are low income or have a disability, you might be eligible for the Medicare Savings Programs (MSPs). They help pay for premiums and deductibles, as well as co-payments. Go online to cms.gov and search for Medicare Savings Programs. Click on one of the four categories for more information and income limits.

Social Security Gets Big Benefits Bump

The news is in. Our Social Security benefit for 2022 will increase by 5.9%, slightly less than the 6.1% estimate the government put out this summer. Still, that's much greater than the 1.3% increase we saw for 2021 and the 1.6% the year before.

The average monthly dollar increase will be $92, making the average benefit $1,657 per month for a single person. For a couple, a $154 increase would come to $2,753 per month.

The official mail on the cost-of-living adjustment will come out in December.

I've done my calculations for next year, and once again I shake my head. We've been notified already that I'll have a rent increase. Heating fuel is likely to go up 47%. We all know what has happened at the grocery store. Medicare Part B is sure to go up, maybe a $10 per month increase.

There is one worrying note, and we need to think about how it will play out for us individually. The question is: Will that increase move us into a higher tax bracket?

It depends on our provisional income. That number is any income (pension, wages, dividends and more) not from Social Security, plus half the amount of Social Security. Those of us who come in under $25,000 won't have a federal tax put on our Social Security. If that number is between $25,000 and $34,000, there will be a tax on half of our Social Security income. Over that and it goes up to a tax on 85% of our Social Security income.

If your situation for 2022 is likely to put you in the category of having to pay taxes on your Social Security benefit, you can elect to have them take money out of your check each month. If you want to learn about that, call the IRS at 1-800-772-1213 and ask for IRS Form W-4V.

Turkey or Ham?

What is Thanksgiving going to look like this year? That's a big question, and many of us don't have the answers yet.

Part of it depends on whether we're still the ones cooking the turkey or whether that particular baton was passed years ago.

Part of it depends on whether we're close enough to relatives that they can drive over or whether somebody would be required to board a plane.

Part of it depends on whether anyone present has a pre-existing condition that would make getting COVID especially risky.

I've done an informal poll of those around me and scattered across the country. One person has flatly stated that his family will all be present with the triple garage turned into a big dining room. Another said it will be a repeat of last year with everyone in their own home with online meeting software running during dinner. Another is delivering a turkey dinner to her mother. Yet another is taking his parents out to a fancy buffet.

Some say it all depends on whether everyone in the group has been vaccinated. Some don't want to take the shot. Many refuse to be around those who didn't take the shot. A few are leery of small children who aren't eligible for the shot, but who are in school with others whose parents might or might not have gotten vaccinated. Or maybe there's a teen who's been released from home prison, as they're calling it, and might or might not have been socially distancing from pals or wearing a mask, which might or might not work anyway. Then there's the wee matter of breathing used air on planes and whether we're sitting next to someone who sneaks off his mask when the stewardesses aren't looking.

It gets complicated, this business of calculating how to handle Thanksgiving. The biggest debate used to be: turkey or ham?