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Health care law changing behavior

By Kelly Kennedy, USA TODAY
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WASHINGTON – More than 2.65 million Medicare recipients have saved more than \$1.5 billion on their prescriptions this year, a \$569-per-person average, while premiums have remained stable, the government plans to announce today.

That's because of the provision of the health care law that put a 50% discount on prescription drugs in the "doughnut hole," the gap between traditional and catastrophic coverage in the drug benefit, also known as Part D.

And, as of the end of November, more than 24 million people, or about half of those with traditional Medicare, have gone in for a free annual physical or other screening exam since the rules changed this year because of the health care law.

"We're very pleased with the numbers," [Jonathan Blum](#), director of the Center for Medicare, told USA TODAY. "We found the Part D premiums have also stayed constant, despite predictions that they would go up in 2012."

The [Department of Health](#) and Human Services announced in August that 2012 Medicare prescription drug plan premiums would average about \$30 a month, compared to \$30.76 in 2011.

Starting this year, seniors who reach the doughnut hole in prescription benefits receive a 50% discount on name brand prescription drugs. Drug companies must provide the discount to participate in the prescription plan. Before the health care law took effect, Medicare patients had to pay full price for their prescriptions once they reached the gap in coverage.

The prescription data are through the end of October.

Seniors are becoming more engaged in their care, Blum said, citing the hundreds of forums Medicare has conducted about the changes. "The sentiment is that Medicare is trying to keep them healthy and out of the hospital," Blum said.

Preventive benefits aren't free, because taxpayers are paying for them, says Michael Cannon, health policy studies director for the [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think tank. "There is no such thing as a free lunch," he said.

Robert Moffit, a senior fellow at the [Heritage Foundation](#), a conservative think tank, said the services may help catch diseases early. But it's too early to tell if the overall savings in Medicare will justify the costs of the preventive care. "This should prove to be a worthwhile experiment."

It's too early to determine if the wellness exams are catching health problems early and therefore preventing hospital trips, Blum said. However, he said, insurance premiums have not risen as much as in previous years.