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Medicare to Cover Smoking Cessation

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Review

WASHINGTON -- Good news for seniors who want to quit smoking -- Medicare will now cover tobacco cessation counseling -- the Department of Health and Human Services announced.

The new coverage was mandated by the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which contains a number of measures that focus on preventing diseases before they occur, such as paying for cancer screenings, and annual no-cost wellness checkups.

"For too long, many tobacco users with Medicare coverage were denied access to evidence-based tobacco cessation counseling," HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said in a statement announcing the new benefit. "Most Medicare beneficiaries want to quit their tobacco use. Now, older adults and other Medicare beneficiaries can get the help they need to successfully overcome tobacco dependence."

Of the 46 million Americans who smoke, about 4.5 million are Medicare beneficiaries over age 65, and another million receive Medicare benefits because of a disability, according to HHS.

Previously, Medicare only covered smoking cessation counseling if a recipient had already been diagnosed with a tobacco-related disease or showed symptoms of such a disease.

All Medicare beneficiaries already have access to smoking-cessation prescription medication through Medicare's prescription drug program, Part D.

Under the new coverage -- which applies to Medicare Part A and Part B -- any Medicare beneficiary who smokes will be able to receive counseling from a "qualified physician or other Medicare-recognized practitioner" who can help them quit smoking.

The benefit will cover up to two separate tobacco cessation attempts per year -- and each stint in stop-smoking counseling can include up to four sessions.

"Giving older Americans and persons with disabilities who rely on Medicare the coverage they need for counseling treatments that can aid them in quitting will have a positive impact on their health and quality of life," said CMS Administrator Don Berwick, MD, in a prepared statement. "As a result, all Medicare beneficiaries now have more help to avoid the painful -- and often deadly -- consequences of tobacco use."

HHS will issue guidance in the next few months on a Medicaid provision in the ACA that requires states to help pregnant women quit smoking.

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