

Medicare drug premiums to increase an average of 24 percent in 2009.

The [Wall Street Journal](#) (9/26, B4, Zhang, Fuhrmans) reports, "The average premium that seniors will pay for Medicare drug coverage in 2009 will rise" 24 percent, according to "Avalere Health LLC, a Washington, D.C., consulting company that analyzed data from Medicare."

[Bloomberg News](#) (9/26, Goldstein) adds that enrollees in "the 10 largest drug plans" may face increases in premiums ranging "from eight percent for UnitedHealth Group Inc.'s AARP MedicareRx Saver to 64 percent for Humana Inc.'s PDP Enhanced plan." For its analysis, Avalere weighted calculations "to reflect varying enrollments and prices of plans in 34 regions," and found that "monthly premiums next year for the 10 largest plans by enrollment will range from \$27.31 to \$40.83."

"Federal health officials encouraged Medicare participants on Thursday to shop around for their prescription drug coverage next year because it could include significant price increases or changes regarding which drugs the plans will cover," according to the [AP](#) (9/26, Freking). Due to increases in "monthly premium[s] for...most popular Medicare Part D plan[s]," such as "the AARP Medicare Rx Preferred Plan, [which] will increase 15 percent, from \$32 to \$37," most enrollees "will see an increase in their monthly premiums if they stay with the same insurer." The AP notes, however, that "overall, the landscape for prescription drug coverage won't look dramatically different next year," because beneficiaries "will still have dozens upon dozens of plans to choose from."

Medicare officials announced Thursday that "97 percent of the 10.5 million enrollees in Medicare's 'stand-alone' drug plans" will not experience increases in premiums in 2009, [HealthDay](#) (9/25, Reinberg) noted. And, according to Kerry Weems, acting administrator of the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), "Medicare beneficiaries across the United States will be able to access at least one prescription drug plan with premiums of less than \$20 a month, except for people living in Alaska, where the one prescription drug plan has a premium of \$23 a month."

[WebMD](#) (9/25, Zwillich) pointed out, however, that the CMS is currently "unclear how drastic the changes will be," because "most of the hundreds of private drug plans nationwide won't release benefit and cost information until the middle of next month." And, in addition to "significant premium increases," Medicare officials are predicting "reduced coverage in Part D's 'gap.'" Currently, "Medicare stops paying drug benefits after spending reaches \$2,510 and doesn't pick up again until most beneficiaries have spent \$5,726 on their medications." The [Los Angeles Times's](#) (9/25, Brink) Booster Shots blog also reported on the Medicare coverage gap.