

## Part D still a challenge for kidney disease patients

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ROCKVILLE, MD—End-stage renal disease patients are still experiencing significant challenges working with the Medicare Part D prescription drug program, according to a recent survey released July 18 by the American Kidney Fund, which provides financial assistance to kidney disease patients.

In its survey of 700 social workers from U.S. dialysis and transplant centers, the AKF found that nearly 60 percent of kidney disease patients had problems paying for their medications while in the coverage gap.

“These survey findings confirm that patients with kidney failure are having serious challenges with Medicare Part D for several reasons,” said LaVarne A. Burton, CEO of the American Kidney Fund. “Most notably, these patients often reach the coverage gap or ‘doughnut hole’ phase of the program faster than other beneficiaries because their medication costs are often twice as high.”

Medicare Part D provides pharmacy benefits to everyone who is eligible for Medicare along with a small copay. However, the coverage stops when drug costs exceed \$2,250—this starts the doughnut hole. In this void, patients get no help with their costs until they reach the catastrophic threshold of \$5,100. At this point, nearly all prescription drug costs are covered, but the patients have already spent another \$2,850 out-of-pocket.

A September 2006 study in the *Journal of the American Society of Nephrology* found that nearly 70 percent of ESRD Medicare beneficiaries fell into the doughnut hole. The authors said previous studies have found ESRD patients take an average of eight to 13 drugs, which is more than most Medicare beneficiaries. And, as the study found, ESRD patients were more likely to fall into the Part D coverage gap because of higher drug costs. Estimated drug costs for ESRD patients were \$6,500 in 2006, compared to \$2,700 for non-ESRD Medicare beneficiaries, according to the study.

“When kidney patients are in the coverage gap, they have difficulty affording the out-of-pocket costs of treatment and often forgo essential medications,” Burton added.

The AKF survey also found that kidney disease patients are likely to be unaware of the Part D program. In addition, patients are likely to experience administrative difficulties during the enrollment phase. Patients also have problems getting medications through their plan’s formulary, and many patients have problems paying premiums or deductibles, according to the survey.

The AKF said they chose to survey social workers for the study because they are often responsible for helping patients complete applications for Part D and other assistance programs. The 700 social workers surveyed work with more than 58,000 kidney patients. Avalere Health, an independent health policy analysis firm, analyzed the data and wrote the report.

“Many kidney failure patients need more education to understand the complex topic of Medicare prescription drug assistance and how they can benefit from the Part D program,” Burton said. “There is also a need for assistance with out-of-pocket costs for medications covered under Part D, and the American Kidney Fund is taking steps to provide this assistance.”