

## US elderly hesitate over Medicare drug plan--study

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WASHINGTON, Nov 10 (Reuters) - Most older Americans do not understand Medicare's new prescription drug benefit and only one in five of them intend to sign up for the plan, according to survey results released on Thursday, less than a week before the start of enrollment.

Twenty percent of the elderly will participate, and about twice as many -- 43 percent -- said they are still not sure, according to a poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health.

Thirty-seven percent said they do not want the new coverage, according to the survey.

Enrollment begins on Nov. 15 for the voluntary benefit, which will be effective on Jan. 1.

Passed by Congress in 2003, the program allows Medicare -- the insurance program for the elderly and disabled -- to oversee companies that want to offer the discount drug plans. Before then, Medicare had not covered most prescription drugs, leaving many older Americans particularly vulnerable to their rising cost.

The types of drugs covered and proportion paid by participants varies between the individual plans, which may number up to 20 in some states.

Wall Street analysts have said they expect about 29 million of the nation's 42 million enrollees to sign up, but some drug makers have expressed doubts.

Many of the 802 people surveyed -- all aged 65 or older -- said they were unsure how the benefit worked. Sixty-one percent said they did not understand it "at all" or "very well." Another 35 percent said they understood it "somewhat" or "very" well.

More than half said they expected to get help choosing a plan from their doctor or pharmacist.

Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt and other health officials have been traveling cross-country since early this year to promote the benefit, which is estimated to cost \$724 billion for the 10 years starting in 2006.

A number of drug companies, pharmacy associations and other groups are also promoting it.

Among those who said they would sign up, about one-third said their biggest concern when picking a plan was how much their share of each prescription would cost. They were less concerned about monthly fees or which drugs were covered, the telephone survey found.

The survey had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

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