

Staying healthy can start with a free Medicare Wellness Visit

By Dr. Chris Baumert

Thinking about how to manage your weight, quit tobacco, exercise regularly or make some other personal health improvement? A visit to your healthcare provider is a good first step.

For people enrolled in Medicare, a free annual wellness visit is part of your benefits. When you first enroll in Medicare, you can have a Welcome to Medicare Visit within the first 12 months that you are covered by Medicare Part B. If you've had Medicare Part B for 12 months or longer, you can get a yearly wellness visit with zero out-of-pocket costs.

The Medicare Wellness Visit is designed to get people thinking about what they can do to stay healthy. It focuses on the whole person. For example, smoking, alcohol, lack of vitamin D and lack of calcium all can decrease bone density, which increases risk of fractures. Likewise, kidney disease increases the risk of breaking bones in a fall. Fall prevention is a major aim of health maintenance for older adults.

Your provider will get your blood pressure reading and weight, but there won't be further physical examination at the Medicare Wellness Visit. Expect to be asked lots of questions. After that, your healthcare provider will spend about 20 minutes with you to discuss your answers.

Your wellness visit will focus on the four M's:

- **Medication.** Bring a list of all the medications, vitamins and supplements you are taking.
- **Mobility.** You will be asked to get up out of a chair and answer questions to gauge your fall risk.
- **Mentation.** Simple tests, such as being asked to repeat back three words several minutes after you first heard them, will be used to detect signs of dementia.
- **What matters most** to you. Your provider will talk to you about advance healthcare directives and provide forms that you may take home.

The Medicare Wellness Visit is intended to get you thinking about prevention and your health years into the future. You and your provider will talk about ideas for achieving your health goals.

When the visit is complete, your provider will give you a paper copy of your wellness assessment and health goals to take home. You will receive recommendations on when to get preventive cancer screenings and immunizations.

Please speak up if you have an urgent health concern when you arrive for your scheduled Medicare Wellness Visit. If you need tests or a physical exam to address your concern, Medicare will cover those

services, but the visit might not be a free wellness visit. Don't hesitate to ask your provider if you will be billed for an office visit.

Some fit and healthy patients hesitate to see the doctor when they aren't sick or injured. When they reluctantly come in for a wellness visit, they often change their outlook. They find the visit valuable. Often, I hear something like "I never thought of that." I encourage everybody to take advantage of the annual wellness visit – even if they think they don't need it.

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