Information about the Medicare Health Outcomes Survey (HOS) for People with Medicare and Their Families

If you are a member of a Medicare Advantage Organization (MAO) health plan, you may have received an invitation to fill out a survey about your health. These surveys are conducted every year on behalf of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), the federal agency that runs Medicare. You may receive one of these surveys and you may be wondering, "What is this for?"

This booklet will introduce you to the Medicare Health Outcomes Survey (HOS) and help you verify the authenticity of the survey. This booklet contains details about the survey, the process of taking part in the survey, and how the survey results are used.

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Background and Introduction

Why do we have a Health Outcomes Survey for people with Medicare Advantage plans?

The HOS exists because the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) wants to put people and their quality of health care first. The survey is sent to people who are members of health plans that are Medicare Advantage Organizations (MAOs).

CMS first distributed this survey in 1998, with the goal of giving useful information about health plans to people like you to use when you are choosing your MAO. CMS has used the HOS for over 25 years!

The survey is designed to give you a chance to tell CMS about your health. The health outcomes that you report are used to evaluate the quality of care your MAO provides to you. Those evaluations are then anonymously shared with the MAOs and publicly reported by CMS.

This booklet reviews the types of questions that are included in the HOS.

Important Facts about the Medicare HOS

- Overseen by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS)
- Administered to sampled members of Medicare Advantage plans
- Began in 1998 and administered every year since
- Participation is voluntary

It is important to note that your participation in the HOS is voluntary and will not affect your healthcare benefits in any way. This booklet also explains how your privacy is protected throughout the survey process.

How the Survey is Administered

Each year, a group of people with Medicare are randomly chosen from every participating Medicare Advantage plan to receive the HOS.

If your health plan has **many** members, you may not be part of the group that is randomly selected. If your health plan has very **few** members, you might get a survey more than once over your years of membership. You will not be asked to complete **this** survey more than once in any single year.

If you are selected to take the survey:

- You will get an invitation letter in the mail.
- Shortly after the letter, the survey form will be mailed to you with instructions on how to fill it out and return it in the enclosed postage paid envelope.
- If you do not return the survey form, you will receive a second copy a few weeks later to give you another opportunity to participate in the survey.
    - You do not have to respond again if you already returned a survey.
    - If you have any questions, please call the contact telephone number listed on your survey materials.
- If you do not return the mailed survey form after the second mailing, you will be contacted several times by telephone.
    - The trained telephone interviewers must also clearly identify themselves as calling on behalf of Medicare for this survey.
    - The interviewer will then give you the opportunity to answer the survey questions over the telephone.
    - Note: Live telephone interviewing by a human is required. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology or simulated/generated human voice systems to replace a human voice is prohibited.

Only CMS-approved survey vendors may administer the survey.

The Survey

How do I know who sent me this survey?

All survey materials are clearly marked with identifying information from CMS. There is also information on the survey materials about how to contact both the company giving the survey and how to contact CMS if you have any questions about the survey or the survey process.

The survey is managed for CMS by several companies (called survey vendors) that must complete training to be approved by CMS. Survey vendors also use CMS-approved materials, follow strict rules to explain that the survey is done on behalf of CMS, and show how they protect the privacy of the people surveyed. You can find the list of CMS-approved survey vendors by visiting the HOSonline website link on the last page of this booklet.

How does the HOS protect my privacy?

First, everyone who handles your surveys and processes the results is subject to all applicable health information and privacy laws. These laws apply to your personal information and any health information that you provide.

Second, every survey vendor ensures your privacy at all times during the collection process. For example, the identification number on the survey is a randomly generated number that allows the vendor to keep track of which questionnaires have been completed and returned, and your name and address are stored separately from your answers to the survey questions.

Your personal answers are NOT shared with your doctors or health plan. Anonymous results are grouped into reports that are sent to the MAOs. Overall scores for the MAOs are also posted publicly on the Medicare website.

Survey Questions

Everyone taking part in the Medicare HOS is asked the same questions about topics related to your lifestyle, daily activities, and any medical conditions that you may have.

Your answers to these questions help CMS understand more about your health, the health of people like you, and learn about how well your health plan is taking care of your needs.

HOS questions are grouped by topic:

- **Physical or Mental Health Issues**: The first few questions ask whether you have any physical or mental health issues that limit your ability in typical daily activities.
- **Daily Activities**: Additional questions ask about your usual daily activities, like bathing, dressing, eating, walking, and if you need help with those activities.
- **Pain:** There are also questions about whether you have pain that interferes with your life, or if your energy level is where you would like it to be.
- **General Health**: Other questions ask about your overall general health and how you would compare your health now to the way it has been in the past. The next survey questions consider specific health issues such as depression, chronic medical conditions you may have, and how well you sleep. Answers to these questions help give a more complete picture of your overall health.
- **Communication from Practitioners**: Finally, there are survey questions asking how your healthcare provider is communicating with you about some health concerns that are common in older adults. For example, one survey question asks whether your doctor or other healthcare provider has talked with you about any falls or balance problems you might have and whether your provider has given you recommendations for physical activity.

At the end of the survey, there are a few questions about your age, marital status, education, and race and ethnicity. Your answers to these questions help CMS compare your health to the health of other people like you.

Common Questions About the Medicare HOS

Can I tell you about my experiences instead of taking a survey?

CMS chose a standardized survey because they use the HOS information to evaluate the quality of care your providers give. Using standard questions about your health and well-being allows the answers from thousands of people on specific topics to be grouped together into measurements that can be easily compared between health plans and over time.

Which survey languages are available?

The HOS is offered in English, Spanish, and for some health plans, Chinese. Your invitation letter will explain the available languages and how to ask for the survey in a different language.

Can I fill out this survey for the person to whom it was addressed?

If your loved one is unable to fill out the survey, you may fill it out on their behalf. There is a question to indicate who filled out the survey and how that person is related to the person in the address. To protect confidentiality, do not write the name of the person to whom the survey was addressed anywhere on the questionnaire.

Can I complete the survey online?

The HOS is not yet available online. It is currently a mailed survey with a telephone call to follow up and complete the survey if you were not able to fill out the mailed copy or would prefer to complete the survey by phone.

How CMS Uses Your Answers

What happens to my answers after I complete the survey?

Answers from all who complete the HOS are grouped, analyzed, and reviewed by CMS. The general results are reported to the MAOs. MAOs are encouraged to use their reports to better understand the health status of all their members. MAOs are also encouraged to use this information to plan future health services to improve the health of their members.

Each MAO's Medicare HOS results become part of scores and Star Ratings that are publicly reported on the Medicare Plan Finder website. CMS designed the Medicare Plan Finder tool to help consumers search for health plans in their geographic area. The tool helps people compare those plans based on standard topic categories. When you can identify top-performing health plans, you can make informed decisions when choosing an MAO. Your answers to the HOS help improve the quality of healthcare for people with Medicare.

If you have answered a survey in the past
or will be answering one in the future,
thank you for your participation!

For More Information

We hope this booklet has been helpful in learning more about the Medicare HOS and how your survey answers are used to improve healthcare for people with Medicare. If you have additional questions or would like to contact us:

Medicare HOS Information and Technical Support
888-880-0077 hos@hsag.com

For questions about HOS program policy, please email CMS:

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS)
hos@cms.hhs.gov

A customer service contact number is also included with all survey materials. CMS-approved survey vendors and their contact information are listed on the Information for People with Medicare website.

https://www.hosonline.org/en/information-for-people-with-medicare/