



Medigap: Who Pays What Medicare Doesn't?

Original Medicare provides extensive medical coverage, but it leaves beneficiaries responsible for deductibles, copayments and coinsurance. A **Medicare Supplement Insurance policy**, commonly called **Medigap**, is private insurance designed to help pay some of those remaining expenses.

The name, however, can be misleading. Medigap fills certain **cost-sharing gaps in Medicare-covered services**. It isn't a magic policy that automatically pays for everything Medicare refuses to cover.

Medigap Works With Original Medicare

With Original Medicare, Medicare pays its share of an approved covered service first. The Medigap policy can then pay some or all of the remaining Medicare cost-sharing according to the particular supplement plan you've purchased.

Medigap policies are standardized by letter in most states. Policies with the same letter provide the same basic standardized benefits regardless of which insurer sells them, although premiums can differ considerably.

What Medigap Doesn't Usually Cover

Medigap generally doesn't provide coverage for long-term custodial care, routine dental or vision services, hearing aids, eyeglasses or private-duty nursing. Modern Medigap policies also don't include prescription drug coverage; beneficiaries needing drug coverage normally obtain Part D separately.

This leads to a distinction worth remembering:

"Medicare didn't pay the entire bill" is not the same as "Medicare doesn't cover this service."

Medigap is principally designed to help with the first problem.

Your Best Time to Buy Matters

The six-month Medigap Open Enrollment Period generally begins when you're 65 or older and enrolled in Part B. During that period, insurers generally cannot use medical underwriting to deny you a Medigap policy or charge more because of health problems.

After that protected period, your rights can be more limited depending on circumstances and state law. Medigap is therefore something to investigate when you first establish Medicare coverage rather than something to assume you can purchase under identical conditions years later.

Supplemental Doesn't Mean Unlimited

A good Medicare supplement can make healthcare expenses much more predictable. But before buying one, understand exactly what Medicare covers, what your particular Medigap plan pays, and what neither covers.

That's the difference between having supplemental insurance and merely assuming you're fully insured.