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Medicare Decisions at 65

Your Initial Enrollment Period playbook

Five Medicare decisions in seven months. Get them right or pay for years.

WHAT IT IS

Your Initial Enrollment Period (IEP) is the 7-month window around your 65th birthday, 3 months before, the month of, and 3 months after. Inside that window, you make five interconnected Medicare decisions. Pick the wrong combination and you face late enrollment penalties, lock yourself into the wrong plan, or miss key coverage. This is the decision framework, what to choose, in what order, and when.

THE FIVE DECISIONS

Part A
Almost always free, enroll regardless (unless HSA conflict)

Part B
Required for most, $202.90/mo base (2026)

Medigap or MA
Which path for your supplemental coverage

Part D
Required if you don't have creditable drug coverage

Special situations
VA, TFL, employer, retiree coverage coordination

TIMING + ORDER

4-6 months before birthday
Start research; gather doctors + drugs list

3 months before birthday
Enroll in Part A + B (coverage starts 1st of birthday month)

Within 6 months of Part B
Medigap with guaranteed issue, use it

Before coverage starts
Pick MA or Medigap + Part D

3 months after birthday
IEP closes; LEPs start accruing if missed

THE 3 THINGS PEOPLE GET WRONG

1. **"I'll enroll later, I don't need Medicare yet."**
   Dangerous. Unless you have creditable coverage (employer 20+, TRICARE, VA), delaying enrollment starts the Late Enrollment Penalty clock immediately. The penalty is permanent.
2. **"Picking MA vs. Medigap can be done later."**
   Technically yes, but the first-year MA trial right + 6-month Medigap Initial Enrollment Period are the ONLY windows where you can switch freely. After those close, switching gets expensive and underwriting kicks in. Pick deliberately the first time.
3. **"Once I enroll, I'm locked in for life."**
   False. AEP (Oct 15–Dec 7) lets you change plans annually. MA OEP gives one switch out of MA per year. SEPs cover life events. You're not locked, but you ARE on the rules clock once IEP closes.

THE MOST EXPENSIVE 65-YEAR-OLD MISTAKES

The three Medicare mistakes that cost retirees the most over a 20-year retirement: (1) Missing Part B enrollment because of COBRA or retiree coverage = $20,000+ in lifetime LEP. (2) Picking MA at 65 with no Medigap quote on file = lose your medical-underwriting protection if you ever want to switch back. (3) Skipping Part D because "I don't take any medications" = guaranteed LEP when you eventually need a prescription plan. All three are preventable with one focused 30-minute conversation BEFORE your 65th birthday.

Approaching 65 (or already there)? Call or text Craig, I'll walk you through all five decisions in one focused conversation before any penalty clock starts.

Don't go underinsured when you can be Insured AF.