

Most U.S. seniors prescribed at least one drug, but many skip meds due to cost

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Too many U.S. seniors are skipping their prescription meds due to cost,

and the problem is most acute among the poor and chronically ill, new data shows. The new study was published Sept. 5 in [National Health Statistics Reports](#).

Almost all (88.6%) Americans aged 65 or older have been prescribed at least one prescription medicine, according to 2021–2022 data from an annual federal survey.

That percentage rises from 86.9% among folks aged 65 to 74 to more than 91% among those aged 75 and older.

Unfortunately, not everyone can afford to fill their prescriptions, the survey also showed.

Overall, "3.6% did not get needed [prescription medication](#) due to cost, and 3.4% did not take medication as prescribed due to cost," concluded a report co-authored by Laryssa Mykyta and Robin Cohen. Mykyta is chief of the Health and Disability Statistics Branch at the U.S. Census Bureau, and Cohen is a statistician at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As the researchers note in their report, Americans are finding it tougher to fit prescription medications into their budgets.

"According to a recent study from RAND, prescription drug prices in the United States are nearly three times higher" than those of other wealthy nations, and "out-of-pocket costs for retail drugs rose 4.8%, to \$63 billion, between 2020 and 2021."

While you might assume that Medicare covers the full cost of prescription drugs for seniors, that's not always true.

"Prescription coverage for adults age 65 and older is not universal,"

Cohen and Mykyta said. Although the Medicare Part D drug plan can cover some of the cost, enrollees "typically pay a premium for coverage and are also responsible for any copays associated with prescription medication costs," the two experts noted.

High copays and deductibles can take a big bite out of a cash-strapped [senior](#)'s monthly budget.

According to the data, most seniors (82.7%) had some form of prescription [drug](#) coverage in 2021–2022. The odds of having coverage rose if the person was white, married and in a higher income bracket, Cohen and Mykyta found.

However, many seniors still fell through the cracks and just couldn't afford drugs they'd been prescribed.

To cope, "2.2% of older adults took less medication than prescribed, 2.7% delayed filling a prescription and 1.7% skipped medication doses due to cost," the researchers said.

Black seniors were more prone to cutting back on their meds due to cost than whites, and the practice was most prevalent in households faced by what the researchers called "[food insecurity](#)."

Among these households, tough decisions were often made between groceries and prescription meds.

"Adults living in food-insecure families were more than six times more likely than adults living in food-secure families to take less medication than prescribed, delay filling a prescription or skip medication doses," the two researchers reported.

And the sicker a low-income person was, the more likely they were to

skip prescription meds due to cost.

Chronic illnesses are widespread among seniors, the researchers noted.

"In 2022, 47.9% of [older adults](#) had been diagnosed with [arthritis](#), 20.1% with diabetes, 48.1% with high cholesterol, and 58.5% with hypertension," Cohen and Mykyta found, and these conditions usually require medication to keep them under control.

More information: Find out more about how to help cover your drug costs at [Medicare.gov](https://www.medicare.gov).

Cohen RA, Mykyta L. Prescription medication use, coverage, and nonadherence among adults age 65 and older: United States, 2021–2022. *National Health Statistics Reports*. (2024). DOI: dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc/160016.

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