

Carol Rice's reaction to the cost of 50 pills of Lipitor to help lower her cholesterol nearly induced another health problem, she said.

"It's terrible, \$2.50 a pill," she said. "When I went in to get, it I almost fainted. It was ridiculous."

Rice, who is in her sixties and lives on a Charlotte Hall farm, has a couple of options. She can enroll in the new Medicare prescription drug benefit plan -- and choose from among 19 insurance companies offering 47 plans -- or she can keep using the discount card from her current insurance and hope to avoid future fainting spells.

"I can't figure out whether it would be cheaper for me to just buy this medicine or get in this [Medicare] program," she said. "I've never had to take anything, so it's a big question."

That big question was addressed at a town hall meeting Friday organized by Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) at the Richard R. Clark Senior Center in La Plata. The gathering was one of many called by federal lawmakers of both parties across the country in recent weeks to discuss the program that went into effect Jan. 1.

Hoyer was critical of the new prescription drug plan, saying it was too complicated and would lead to higher drug prices because it prevents the federal government from negotiating discounts with pharmaceutical companies. He also criticized the program for allowing insurance companies to alter plans and change what drugs are covered after a 60-day notice to the consumer, although the same category of drugs will be available, he said.

"This is one of the problems with this program. There are 47 different options, and within those 47 options obviously there are a whole lot of different ways that they treat things," said Hoyer, who voted against the Medicare drug plan. "You don't know how the premiums are going to change . . . and you don't know that they're going to keep that drug on the list."

Yet Hoyer said "there are substantial benefits" to those who choose a plan appropriate for their needs, and also for the poor and those who spend a lot on prescription drugs.

Seniors face a May 15 deadline to sign up for the Medicare drug benefit. After that date, those who do not have prescription drug coverage will pay a penalty of about \$3 a month to sign up, said Gwendolyn McMillan-Bell, program specialist in Charles County's Senior Health Insurance Program in the Department of Community Services.

Hoyer recommended that seniors read the Medicare literature before choosing an option.

"Pick one that covers the drug that you need, and one that is affordable and one that works for the pharmacies that are convenient to you," he said. "In other words, you've got to make sure that the drugs are covered."

Since the program went into effect in Charles County, the Department of Community Services has been handling a high volume of calls from seniors with questions about their options, said Theresa Mason, senior information and assistance coordinator.

One problem, she said, is that occasionally the prescription drug cards of those enrolled are not accepted at pharmacies. In another case, a 70-year-old man in Bryans Road, who wasn't enrolled, was told erroneously that his current insurance would not be accepted because of the new system, she said.

"We're running into problems now," she said. "It's been a challenge."

"This whole program is very confusing," said Margaret James, 67, of White Plains, who enrolled in the Medicare program but is considering changing her benefit plan to try to save money. "I didn't research like I should have."

Another woman at the town meeting agreed.

"It's not user-friendly at all," said Dorothy Wallace, 67, of White Plains, who estimated that she pays \$800 per year for drugs for her diabetes, cholesterol and heart problems. "And when you take older people, you get a little more confused."

The Waldorf Jaycees also put on workshops about the Medicare drug plan last week. More workshops are scheduled for the La Plata CVS pharmacy beginning Thursday, Mason said.

"You need to know what your benefits are and make a rational decision on what's best for you," Hoyer said.