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Walkers and Wheelchairs and Braces, Oh My!

By Jenna Gladfelter

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***Writer's Note:** This article was written by the New York SMP and has been distributed in newsletters to beneficiaries in our state. Since the beginning of the year, we noticed an increase in complaints about "free" durable medical equipment offers. In order to address this issue quickly and effectively, we offered this article to each of our state's Offices for the Aging. We welcome fellow SMPs to use this article to teach their beneficiaries as well.*

Have you ever received a postcard in the mail saying you're eligible for a free back brace? Maybe someone has called to tell you that your doctor has approved you for a free knee brace – all you need to do is provide your Medicare number! Sounds like a good deal, right? Maybe too good?

Unfortunately, it is. Durable medical equipment (aka DME) scams are some of the most common forms of health care fraud. But what exactly is DME? And why are these offers considered scams?

First, DME is designed to mainly be used in your home. It could be a walker, a wheelchair, a hospital bed, or some kind of brace. These pieces of equipment are intended to uniquely fit you! For example, a knee or back brace will require your measurements. A wheelchair will not only fit your body but also be specially measured to ensure you can move throughout your home. A DME supplier is required to thoroughly gather this information and to ensure a perfect fit.

Secondly, there are several reasons these phone calls and postcards could be considered scams. To start, Medicare representatives are not allowed to solicit by phone. And in order for Medicare to cover a piece of DME in the first place, you need a prescription from a doctor stating why you need it. Lastly, DME is covered by your Part B plan and almost always has a copayment.

So what's in it for the scammer? Two things: personal information and money! With these scams, the person on the phone will almost always ask for your Medicare number, which also happens to be your Social Security number. That information in the wrong hands could be really harmful. Most of the time, scam artists will then bill Medicare for a piece of equipment – sometimes more expensive

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than the one they may have sent you – and collect the money for themselves. Not only can they wrongfully use your Medicare benefits but they also could, and often do, commit identity theft. With your Social Security number, they are able to open bank accounts and credit cards and request loans in your name – all without your knowledge or permission.

This sounds bad. How can I protect myself?

We're glad you asked...

We like to tell people that knowledge is power. By knowing how scammers operate, you can stop them in their tracks. It's important to be wary of any offers that promise "free" products or services. After all, there's no such thing as a free lunch! So, don't be afraid to hang up the phone or toss that postcard in the trash.

However, you don't just have to play defense. YOU can help us fight fraud! We encourage you to be proactive and report any suspicious activity to the New York Senior Medicare Patrol. This information not only shows us if scammers are targeting a specific neighborhood, zip code, or city, but it also helps us report fraud trends to the proper authorities.

If you ever have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to contact the NY Senior Medicare Patrol program. **We're here to help you.** ●