

Q: Can people on Medicare get food stamps too?

A: Yes, many people on Medicare also qualify for food stamps. The public may think you have to be on welfare to qualify for food stamps, but that's not true.

Food stamps are a great way to stretch your food budget, like clipping store coupons. Food stamps help you buy food. For seniors living on fixed incomes, the high cost of other items, like prescription drugs, can limit your food budget. That's where food stamps can help.

You can use food stamps like a credit card. When you qualify for food stamps, you will be given an account, like a bank account. You will also get a plastic card called the Mass EBT card. Each month, your food stamp benefits are put into your account. You can use your EBT card at grocery stores, convenience stores, markets, and co-ops. You use them the same way someone would buy food with a bank card or a credit card. There's no more "special money" to have to handle.

The food stamp benefit is worth the effort to apply. A single elderly person can get up to \$1,788 a year in food stamps, depending on your income and expenses. The average food stamp benefit in Massachusetts is around \$900 a year. You can own a home and a car and still qualify for food stamps. Seniors can have up to \$3,000 in assets. Your personal belongings don't count. You get more food stamps if you have high housing or medical costs, such as prescription drug bills, or homemaker and personal care services, a seeing eye dog, health insurance premiums, eyeglasses—even travel expenses to and from the doctor's. So be sure to mention these expenses when you apply for food stamps.

If you have received one of the new Medicare drug discount cards, and you qualified for the Medicare \$600 subsidy, then it is very likely you will qualify for food stamps. In fact, if you have a Medicare drug card, you will get an extra \$252 a year in food stamps for 2005.

To apply for food stamps, call the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) toll-free at 1-800-249-2007. You can also find out if you may be eligible for food stamps by going to www.gettingfoodstamps.org and using their food stamp eligibility calculator. If you need help to apply, you can ask a friend to help you with the process. Apply as soon as possible, because you will receive food stamps back to the date when you first submitted your signed application form.

Thousands of older people in Massachusetts are eligible for food stamps, but don't apply. If you took advantage of the Medicare drug card and \$600 subsidy, check out your right to get an even higher level of food stamps too. The goal of both programs is to put more buying power in your pocket. Food stamps put more food on the table, and good nutrition is an essential part of overall good health.