

Residents of skilled nursing facilities can leave their facility to attend a family holiday celebration without losing their Medicare coverage! The Medicare Benefit Policy Manual recognizes that although most beneficiaries are unable to leave their facility,

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an outside pass or short leave of absence for the purpose of attending a special religious service, holiday meal, family occasion, going on a car ride, or for a trial visit home, is not, by itself evidence that the individual no longer needs to be in a SNF for the receipt of required skilled care.[1]

**A facility should not notify patients that leaving the facility will lead to loss of Medicare coverage.** Such a notification is "not appropriate," says the Manual.

If the resident returns to the facility by midnight, the facility can bill Medicare for the day's stay.[2]

If the resident is gone overnight (i.e., past midnight) and returns to the facility the next day, the day the resident leaves is considered a leave of absence day. While the facility cannot bill Medicare for leave of absence days[3], it is today unclear whether the facility can bill the beneficiary for those days.

As the Center for Medicare Advocacy has reported in prior years, Chapter 6 of the Medicare Claims Processing Manual says that the facility cannot bill a beneficiary during a leave of absence.[4] However, a provision in Chapter 1 of the Medicare Claims Processing Manual, issued May 30, 2008, authorizes skilled nursing facilities to bill a beneficiary for bed-hold during a temporary "SNF Absence" if the SNF informs the resident in advance of the option to make bed-hold payments and of the amount of the charge and if the resident "affirmatively elect[s]" to make bed-hold payments prior to being charged.[5] CMS confirms that "a facility cannot simply deem a resident to have opted to make such payments and then automatically bill for them upon the resident's departure from the facility." [6]