

You can reap the rewards of age

TOUGHER rules for accessing the popular Commonwealth Seniors Health Card came into force last week, but there is still a mountain of money-saving offers available to older Aussies.

Big savings on medicines and health services, public transport, council and water rates, energy bills and retail discounts are available for those willing to take some time to understand how various concession cards work.

On January 1, the Federal Government started including account-based pensions, also known as allocated pensions, in its income testing for the CSHC, which offers benefits similar to those of pensioner concession cards to non-pensioners.

Account-based pensions are now deemed like other financial assets, but because of the generous income test limits to qualify for the CSHC (\$51,500 for a single and \$82,400 for a couple) and Australia's low deeming rates of up to 3.5 per cent, only wealthy retirees are likely to lose benefits.

Seniors group COTA Australia's chief executive, Ian Yates, said he believed the changes were fair.

"Our policy is that all income should be treated the same, regardless of the source," he said.

"Current account-based pensions from super are not affected, but if you change it or buy new ones, they are."



Pensioner concession cards and the CSHC are prized by older Australians, particularly for the access they give to cheap medicines under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Instead of paying a maximum of \$37.70 for most prescription drugs, concession cardholders pay just \$6.10.

Marinis Financial Group managing director Theo Marinis said only high-income earners would be hit by the CSHC means-testing changes, and the card was still hugely popular.

"They all know about the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card and are falling over themselves to get it – even the self-funded retirees," he said.

Joining groups such as COTA and National Seniors can deliver discounts in areas such as buy-one-get-one-free meal deals, gift cards, holidays and wine.

Older Australians can also get discounts from the Seniors Card, a free state-based card for over-60s. Some states have a working hours limit to qualify for the card, while the benefits can include cheaper council rates, public transport, entrance fees and shopping discounts.

"It's aged related. There's no means testing – as soon as you turn 60 you can get the card and all sorts of discounts," Mr Marinis said.

Mr Yates said both the Seniors Card and the CSHC were valuable. "We encourage people to use them to their full entitlements. It can add up to quite a significant saving."