

Provider Report™

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Gaining Ground With Asthma Treatment

New medications and improved disease management tools over the past decade have resulted in more effective control of severe asthma in children, according to findings reported at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology in March 2009.

The study compared young patients treated from 2004 to 2007 with those treated from 1993 to 1997. It found that use of oral corticosteroids in the more recent group was considerably lower, as was the average dose. Use of rescue inhalers also was lower.

Since the introduction of clinical guidelines in 1991, asthma mortality has declined, but the disease continues to be a common reason for hospital admissions and emergency room treatment. The latest 2007 guidelines focus on asthma control, highlighting the need for action plans individualized for each patient. Given the complex nature of asthma, say experts, tailored interventions should take into account a variety of factors, including city or suburban conditions, the presence of allergens, stressful life events and obesity, which can affect a person's response to medications.

New asthma education efforts are showing promising results among younger patients, including a program that incorporates basketball camp and instruction in asthma control, and another that uses text messaging for medication reminders to teens.

Look for a renewed focus on better utilization of the 2007 "Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Management of Asthma," which the AMA encourages physicians to follow. The report is available online at www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/asthma.

PLEASE NOTE that Absolute TOTAL Care's medical management fax machines are monitored during regular business hours only. Therefore, ATC will only process inpatient notifications and clinical information that is called in to 1-866-433-6041 after normal business hours.

Are You Listening?

Patients want to know this first and foremost.



Patient satisfaction is an integral part of healthcare quality, and there's a strong correlation between the quality of physician communication and overall patient satisfaction. On patients' communications wish list is a provider who listens to them, takes them seriously, treats them with dignity, encourages them to express their concerns and expectations and then addresses them, explains things in terms they understand, and allows adequate time for discussion and questions.

When trying to balance workload demands with patients' desire for meaningful face time, you may be tempted to cut short the consultation and jump right into test-ordering mode, thinking that your patients would prefer such action. But results of a recent study published in the *Annals of Family Medicine* suggest that you could be missing a communications opportunity that might result in better patient care.

The study involved primary care physicians and patients whose office visit involved recent, commonly occurring complaints of unexplained causes. Patients were randomly assigned to physicians who either ordered immediate blood tests or instead initiated four weeks of watchful waiting to be followed up with if the symptoms continued.

Ultimately, neither of these approaches made a bigger impact on patient satisfaction and anxiety. But the researchers did find that physician-patient communication had an influence. Patients who felt that they were being taken seriously, who were made aware of the seriousness of their complaints afterward, and whose physicians discussed testing tended to be more satisfied with the consultation.

The authors concluded, "Physicians overestimate the effects of additional testing in patients seeking care for unexplained complaints and underestimate how much they themselves can contribute to the well-being of their patients by discussing their worries."

2 Tips to Help Prepare For the Two-Flu Season

3 Announcing Our Adoption Of PaySpan Health

4 A Look at Telehealth's Promising Future

Sugar's Not-So-Sweet Problems

Among health professionals, consumption of sugared beverages—sodas, fruity drinks, sports drinks, etc.—is considered an American public health threat, especially for children and adolescents. There's an abundance of evidence (for children and adults) associating sugary drinks with increased body weight and body mass index, heightened risk of obesity and diabetes, and poor nutrition. A recent study published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that young and middle-age women who drank more than two servings of sugary beverages each day had a 40 percent higher risk of heart disease compared with women who rarely drank such drinks.

When discussing weight and diet with patients, make these points:

- Sugar-sweetened beverages account for 10 to 15 percent of calories consumed by children and adolescents.
- Each 12-ounce can of sugared cola typically contains 10 to 12 teaspoons of sugar. That's about 150 calories.
- A child's likelihood of becoming obese increases by 60 percent for each extra can of sugared beverage consumed per day.

Suggest healthier alternatives—water, first and foremost; artificially sweetened beverages if used sparingly. If patients can't go cold turkey, they should at least get smaller-sized bottles (8 ounces) and make them an occasional treat. Sugary fruit drinks can be watered down to a 50/50 mix.

Use the handout "How Sweet Is It?" to reinforce your healthy message. Download it at www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-drinks/how-sweet-is-it/index.html.

Double Trouble

Be prepared for the challenges of seasonal and H1N1 flu.

This flu season is complicated by having the traditional seasonal flu along with the novel H1N1 (swine) influenza. A vaccine for H1N1 is in production and will likely be of a type that is most effective if given two times about three weeks apart. The seasonal and H1N1 vaccines are intended to be used together to fight different influenza viruses and can be given on the same day.

ACOG and the CDC both recommend the seasonal and H1N1 flu shots for almost all pregnant women. Pregnant women are much more likely to get sick if infected with the H1N1 virus—even if they are healthy. At any one time, one percent of the population in our country is pregnant, but already 13 percent of the deaths from H1N1 infection have been in pregnant women.

Additionally, the CDC recommends both the seasonal and H1N1 flu vaccination for children six months to 18 years of age, caregivers of those less than six months old and non-elderly adults with certain chronic



conditions. H1N1 flu vaccine alone is recommended for adults 19 to 24 years of age. Seasonal flu vaccine continues to be recommended for people with certain chronic conditions and all adults 50 years and older.

With two types of influenza and two different immunizations, education is even more important this flu season. Absolute TOTAL Care is sending out educational information to its members, including pregnant women, encouraging them to get the flu vaccines. We will also be updating our Absolute TOTAL Care website and sending out additional provider mailings as updated CDC information becomes available.

VITAMIN SURGE In hard economic times, out-of-pocket healthcare costs can be out of reach for many people. Recent surveys find an increasing number of consumers taking their healthcare into their own hands—and not always wisely so. They're cutting back on needed doctor visits and prescription medications, risking serious medical problems over time in favor of short-term savings.

Many people also are putting their faith in vitamins and herbal and nutritional supplements to cure and prevent illnesses and boost their health. In the fourth quarter of 2008, sales of vitamins and supplements rose eight percent over the previous year's numbers, in an industry with domestic sales of \$23 billion in 2007.

This trend makes asking patients about their use of vitamins and supplements more important than ever. Ask what they're taking, how much and why. In doing a routine review of medications, discuss recommended dosages and possible adverse effects, including interactions with prescription drugs.

Consumers could save some money by paying attention to the evidence. In one recent study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, multivitamins offered postmenopausal women no protection against cancer or heart disease. In another, neither vitamin E nor selenium reduced the risk for prostate cancer in men over age 50.

Just a Click Away

We now offer PaySpan Health transactions.

Absolute TOTAL Care now offers providers PaySpan Health—a solution that delivers electronic payments (EFTs), remittance advices (ERAs) and much more. Free to Absolute TOTAL Care providers, the solution enables online presentation of remittance information and straightforward reconciliation of payments to help providers reduce costs, speed secondary billings and improve cash flow.

Enrollment in PaySpan Health allows you to enjoy the convenience of electronic deposits for your claim payments and provides you with the opportunity to choose the method by which you receive remittance information:

- Electronic remittance advices presented online.
- HIPAA 835 electronic remittance files for download directly to a HIPAA-compliant practice management or patient accounting system.

PROVIDER BENEFITS

As a provider, you can gain immediate benefits by signing up for PaySpan Health:

- **Reduce accounting expenses**—Electronic remittance advices can be imported directly into practice management or patient accounting systems, eliminating the need for manual rekeying.
- **Improve cash flow**—Electronic payments can mean faster payments, leading to improvements in cash flow.
- **Maintain control over bank accounts**—You keep total control over the destination of claim payment funds. Multiple practices and accounts are supported.
- **Match payments to advices quickly**—You can easily associate electronic payments with electronic remittance advices.
- **Manage multiple payers**—Re-use enrollment information to connect with multiple payers. Assign different payers to different bank accounts, as desired.

REGISTERING YOUR PRACTICE

Signing up for PaySpan Health is simple, secure and only takes five to 10 minutes to complete. Go to www.payspanhealth.com. Have your bank

Provider Communications With Members

Each healthcare provider who furnishes services to Absolute TOTAL Care members has the right to advocate on behalf of those members and may openly discuss a member's health status, medical care and treatment options, including any alternative treatment that may be self-administered. The provider may provide any information to the member in order to aid the member in deciding among all relevant treatment options as well as the risks, benefits and consequences of suggested treatment or of non-treatment, regardless of the cost or benefit coverage the member has. The provider will ensure that the member is able to fully participate in decisions regarding his or her healthcare, including the right to refuse treatment or to express preferences about future treatment decisions.

routing and account information found on a check, not a deposit slip, available. A full user guide is available online after you have registered.

For additional assistance, call 1-877-331-7154, or e-mail providersupport@payspanhealth.com.

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Telehealth: IT Goes the Distance

The future looks bright for this tech-friendly form of healthcare.

When information technology meets healthcare, the result is far-reaching in more ways than one. Telehealth—also called telemedicine, e-health, connected health and cyber-health—encompasses a broad range of applications for connecting patients, providers, insurers and information providers across distance. IT developments continue to expand the boundaries.

Everyday digital-based items like computers, the Internet, cell phones and data-storage devices are transformed into telehealth tools by special applications. Electronic health records, social-network disease support groups, e-prescribing, text-messaging health reminders, remote monitoring and video conferencing serve to close the distance between healthcare stakeholders and foster real-time interaction.

An example of telehealth in action is the use of “telestroke exams,” in which stroke specialists

use teleconferencing technology to remotely examine stroke patients for diagnosis and treatment. The exams are as effective as bedside workups, according to a review of existing studies published in *Stroke: Journal of the American Heart Association* and released online.

Recent Examples

A review of 11 studies published in the *European Journal of Cardiovascular Prevention & Rehabilitation* involving telephone and Internet-based interventions to reduce cardiac patients’ risk factors found that patients who received telehealth interventions showed lower total cholesterol levels and systolic blood pressure compared with patients who did not receive telehealth interventions. **More of the patients who received telehealth interventions also stopped smoking and increased their physical activity levels.**

In another recent example, among

type 2 diabetes patients, those who participated in a 12-month Web-based care management program showed more improved glycemic control when compared with non-participants. The program included access to electronic medical records, secure e-mail with providers and feedback on glucose readings, and an interactive online diary for tracking exercise, diet and medication.

Using telehealth tools, patients with chronic illness can stay connected to providers who monitor their health status for signs of trouble and intervene to avoid hospitalizations. The connection keeps patients actively involved in the ongoing management of their illness and reduces healthcare costs.

Given the challenges of a rising rate of chronic illnesses, complicated by an aging population and unsustainable growth in healthcare spending, the future looks promising for telehealth.

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For more information about our Clinical Guidelines, please visit our website at www.absoluteotalcare.com.

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