Introduction to Asthma

Asthma is a complex lung disease that is characterized by unpredictable periods of wheezing, breathlessness, chest tightness and coughing. It is the most common chronic disease in children, affecting approximately 9.5 percent of children in the United States. Many patients experience frequent symptoms that can impair their quality of life. However, this impairment is preventable with appropriate use of medications. If asthma is not managed or treated appropriately, the disease may lead to additional physician visits, hospitalizations, lost days at work or missed school days. When a patient is experiencing an asthma attack and has trouble breathing, expensive emergency services are required to resolve the patient’s condition. These unexpected medical services lead to rising health care costs, an estimated $14.7 billion, and diminished quality of life.

What a Pharmacist Provides

Pharmacist-provided asthma services can improve patient care by ensuring appropriate medications are prescribed and treatment plans are followed. Patients can be at an increased risk of exacerbations and potentially death if they do not use these medications properly. Pharmacists can educate patients on their disease to improve understanding of how to prevent asthma attacks by avoiding triggers and how to use inhalers properly. Pharmacists’ knowledge of asthma medications and their regular interaction with patients allow them to promote medication adherence, which is a critical component to managing asthma. These services are offered in the hospital environment as well as in community pharmacies and health clinics. In some clinics, pharmacists are also involved in administering nebulizer treatments and listening to lung sounds with a stethoscope to check for wheezing. Pharmacists communicate care issues with the patients’ primary care providers throughout the course of care. By incorporating pharmacists into a patient’s asthma care team, they can live a healthier and happier life.

Poor inhaler technique is frequent in asthma, but its long-term consequences have been seldom assessed. Pharmacists are ideally positioned to teach inhaler technique. In a study involving 727 patients who were in need of improved inhaler technique and adherence, optimal inhaler technique rose from 24 percent to 79 percent after pharmacist-provided training. In addition, a greater change in overall asthma management was seen in those patients who received training from a pharmacist.