

# Medication non-adherence

## How to encourage medication adherence to decrease health costs

It was the late C. Everett Koop, a former U.S. surgeon general, who once famously said: “Drugs don’t work in patients who don’t take them.” That’s a simple way to look at a costly and complex problem — medication non-adherence — where the failure to take drugs on time in the dosages prescribed is both dangerous for patients and costly to the health care system.

“There are a number of reasons that people either don’t take their medication or stop taking it before they should,” says Chronis Manolis, RPh, vice president of pharmacy for UPMC Health Plan. “But what it often comes down to is a lack of understanding of the disease and a lack of respect for the condition.”

*Smart Business* spoke with Manolis about the problem of medication non-adherence and the ways it can be addressed.

### What does medication non-adherence cost?

This problem impacts the cost of health care in many ways. According to the Express Scripts Drug Trend Report, \$329 billion was spent on avoidable medical and pharmacy expenses as a result of patients not being adherent to medication treatments. Approximately 50 percent of patients do not take their medication as prescribed, which results in increases in the overall cost of treating chronic conditions and increases the number of hospitalizations and emergency department visits.

### Why is medication non-adherence a persistent problem?

Clearly, there are a number of reasons why people may not take their medicine as directed by their physician. Consider, for example, people who have asymptomatic conditions such as high blood pressure, cholesterol disease and Type 2 diabetes.

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For them, taking medication may have no immediate effect on the way they feel. And, when medicine does not make you feel better, some don’t understand why they need to take it. As a consequence, many do not.

### What are other factors that contribute to medication non-adherence?

Well, first, there’s the cost of the prescription. If there’s no generic available, it can be expensive, and a patient may simply choose not to purchase it. Then, there’s forgetfulness, which is a factor for older patients, but also for others as well. Some patients may avoid taking medicine because they fear the possible side effects. Others may not take it because they do not believe that the medication is truly effective.

But, what is often the underlying cause is a basic lack of understanding of their condition. Many patients do not realize they are taking medicine now in order to stay healthy in the years to come and to avoid a more serious condition 10, 20 or 30 years later when it will be too late to treat it with medication. For some, that’s a hard concept to grasp.

### What kinds of solutions would help promote medication adherence?

Solving the problem of medication non-adherence is complex because there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution. A

comprehensive, multi-pronged solution is needed to improve medication adherence.

These include promoting the need for more conversation between physicians and patients concerning the importance of medication in the overall treatment plan. There also needs to be a way to involve pharmacists more. Pharmacists are uniquely positioned to reinforce the message regarding the importance of medication. This can include encouraging patients to use their medication as prescribed and asking patients if they understand why they are taking a drug and if they understand the condition that it’s being used for.

Health plans can play a role as well because they can determine if patients are refilling their prescriptions in a timely manner. Health plan pharmacists can reach out to non-adherent patients and provide customized solutions and tools for patients to improve adherence. Additionally, health plan pharmacists can help triage specific patient adherence issues to other members of the health plan’s team including care managers and health coaches. For example, if cost is a factor, often less expensive generics are available. If forgetfulness is a problem, pillboxes or enrolling in refill reminder programs could work. Or, finding a substitute for the medication or changing dosing and/or frequency of the medication can eliminate side effects. ●