Best Practices for Improving Medication Adherence

Estimated US costs of non-adherence range from $105.8 billion for adults diagnosed with diabetes, hypertension, or dyslipidemia in 2010 to $290 billion for all patients in 2012.

Non-adherence has many underlying causes, including issues related to cost, health illiteracy, medication side effects, and patient forgetfulness.

Nonadherence can fall into the following categories:

1. Primary nonadherence is when a patient does not fill an initial prescription
2. Secondary nonadherence is when a patient does not refill a prescription on time.
3. Unintentional nonadherence occurs when a patient simply forgets to take medication or is careless in some way as to miss a scheduled dose
4. Intentional nonadherence is a decision to not take the medication, and may be the most important aspect of nonadherence that must be addressed, with some estimates showing that up to 80 percent of nonadherence may be intentional.

Industry reports nationwide average adherence rates range from 40-80% and that 12-23% of prescriptions are never filled (primary non-adherence)

Barriers to Medication Adherence: Patients typically provide several reasons for nonadherence.

1. Patient's perception of unrealistic goals of therapy
2. Medication costs
3. Fear of medication side effects
4. A lack of immediate visible benefits
5. Not knowing how to take or use the medication(s)
6. Previous negative experiences with medications
7. Complexity of medication regimens

Best Practices to Improve Medication Adherence

1. Prescriber-Patient relationship to help patient buy-in: the patient understands what has been verbally explained, understands that the medication is important, and will have the prescription filled and self-administer as instructed. In addition, it is assumed the patient will contact the prescriber if any questions arise or side effects are encountered. Adherence rates have been found to be nearly three times higher in primary care relationships characterized by very high levels of trust.
2. Cost: Most Mail Order Pharmacies are offering generic medications for zero co-pay (most of the medications are available generically in the adherence measure); $4 medications; sample prior to having the medication filled
3. 90 day supply: Evidence shows filling medications for a 90 supply increases adherence rates.
4. Do not split pills: Cost should no longer drive the splitting of pills; increases risk of medication adverse event if admitted and patient unable to communicate actual dose
5. Once daily dosing or combination therapies: A simplified regimen will assist with adherence especially when combined with provider reinforcement.
6. Synchronization of medications: Many pharmacies have synchronization programs to help with adherence (such as bubble packaging, blister pack). There may be a small fee associated with it.