

September 2014

# Take your pills

Gaining the benefits of improved drug adherence



Join **THE CONVERSATION**, brought to you by Sun Life Financial – Group Benefits.

Life's brighter under the sun



# Foreword

In order to gain the positive health outcomes associated with prescription medications, patients must take their drugs “as prescribed” – a simple fact, but in my experience as a pharmacist, it is one that too many patients ignore.

Many employers I speak with have minimal knowledge that patient non-adherence to prescribed drug treatments is common and can greatly impact their employees’ health status, benefit plan costs and overall productivity.

Since there can be many different factors influencing an individual’s adherence to a drug regimen, there is no “one size fits all” solution. The good news is that there are many things you can do to set your employees up for success. The right information, tools and systems can make all the difference.

This paper outlines actions employers can take to improve their employees’ drug adherence, including practical steps that are not complicated or expensive, but can provide your organization with a great start.

So, please read on to learn more about this important issue and the steps you can begin to take to improve the health of your employees and your organization’s bottom line.

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**Jean-Michel Lavoie,** B.Pharm., MBA  
Director, Pharmaceutical Benefits  
Sun Life Financial

## THE CONVERSATION.

At Sun Life, we know that it takes many voices to have a great conversation. That’s why we are working with a wide range of people – inside and outside of Sun Life – to bring the best thinking in Group Benefits to the marketplace. These are subject experts, visionaries and leaders in best practices and innovative ideas – coming together to take benefits to the next level. We will be using our resources, expertise and relationships to facilitate the dialogue. We understand the power of great minds. We want everyone to contribute.

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# Why aren't employees taking their medication properly?

Get a prescription, take your medication, manage or cure your condition. It's a simple formula for a return to health – provided you follow the formula. But here's the shocker: a huge number of people don't take their medications properly. According to the World Health Organization, adherence to long-term therapy for chronic illnesses in developed countries such as Canada averages just 50 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

Your drug plan is not immune. Thirty-seven per cent of Canadians today are managing a chronic condition, including illnesses such as arthritis, hypertension, diabetes and asthma.<sup>2</sup> These conditions are not only common, but on the rise and can represent a significant cost to your drug plan. Non-adherence compounds your long-term costs because these conditions are not being properly treated and managed.

And the costs are significant. Every year, medication non-adherence results in 5 per cent of Canadian hospital admissions, 5 per cent of physician visits, and contributes \$4 billion to health care costs.<sup>3</sup> It also contributes to faster disease progression, temporary disability, and increased absenteeism. There's no question that all of these factors – as well as the health and wellbeing of the patient – could be positively affected if more people took their medication as prescribed.

But it's easier said than done, as there is no silver bullet solution. Drug adherence – or non-adherence – can be influenced by a patient's values, beliefs, attitudes, preferences, wants, habits, lifestyle, desired quality of life, and past experiences with drug therapy. Simply put, there are a lot of variables in the mix, and a one-size-fits-all fix doesn't exist.

While 100 per cent adherence will likely never be achieved, there are steps that you can take as a plan sponsor to help make it easier for employees to take their medication and stay on the road to better health. While there is no comprehensive solution, you'll find that the small steps outlined in this paper can add up – and have a significant, positive impact.

<sup>1</sup> Adherence to long-term therapies, Evidence for Action, World Health Organization, 2003

<sup>2</sup> 9000 Points of Care: Improving Access to Affordable Healthcare, April 2013

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

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# Why non-adherence happens

Much more than skipping a pill, non-adherence happens when a patient doesn't fill or re-fill a prescription, takes the wrong dosage, doesn't follow the prescribed frequency, timing, sequencing or purpose of the medication, or shares medication with others.

So why is it that so many patients are failing to follow their prescriptions? As you might expect, the answer isn't simple. In fact, there are several causes of non-adherence, including the characteristics of the patients, the disease, and the medication itself.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PATIENTS

Individuals are motivated by different triggers, which can in turn change or maintain behaviour. Solving for non-adherence can mean deciphering complex patient motivators and tailoring strategies specifically for that person. Financial carrots or sticks, social dynamics, personality styles and situational circumstances may all come in to play and can influence different patients in different ways.

That said, there are some groups that are more at risk than others. For example, clinically depressed patients – or those with another underlying condition that impacts mental health – are more likely to be non-adherent.



As a plan sponsor, you're already helping your employees by providing easy, affordable coverage for the medications they need. Empowering your employees with easy claims submission, additional tools – such as a mobile drug app from an insurance carrier that provides information at the point of care – can break down the barriers to adherence even further.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISEASE

In many cases, conditions with no symptoms, or those that have symptom-free periods, are more likely to lead to non-adherence, as they do not remind patients to take their medication (hypertension is one such example). Also, if a condition requires the patient to take more than one drug, the likelihood of missing or mixing up the dosage, timing or sequencing is far greater. Chronic conditions and lifelong treatment are also risk factors for non-adherence.

One strategy specific to your organization is to review your plan demographics to determine the chronic conditions that occur most frequently. From there, you can develop a wellness program that helps employees in the prevention and/or management stage of that condition. Talk to your insurer about the programs available.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MEDICATION – AND HOW IT'S PACKAGED AND DISPENSED

It's not surprising that experiencing side effects is perhaps the single largest cause of non-adherence. Medication that is perceived to diminish a patient's quality of life – or causes other physical or mental health issues – is less likely to be taken as prescribed.

But it's not just side effects that can lead to non-adherence. The packaging and overall formulation of the medicine can also play a role. Complicated packaging (such as childproof vials) or complex treatments (such as having to take more than one dose a day, or using an inhaler or other device), can have a negative impact on adherence.





# The benefits of drug adherence

First, the bad news about drug adherence: in the short term, costs may actually increase – anywhere between 3 and 5 per cent – simply because patients would now be taking what is prescribed to them.<sup>4</sup>

Now the good news: **the long-term benefits far outweigh the short-term impact** in terms of cost, patient health, employee productivity, and sustainability of the Canadian health care system and employer-sponsored benefit plans. Over the long term, increased drug adherence provides a significant benefit to patients, employers, and the Canadian health care system. Increasing drug adherence will result in a reduction of many costs that your drug plan and your

employees may be absorbing. Specifically, greater adherence leads to:<sup>5</sup>

- Fewer hospital visits
- Slower disease progression
- A decrease in additional medical treatments
- Less temporary disability
- Lower absenteeism
- A 2 to 9 per cent decrease in total health care costs for every 10 per cent increase in adherence.

In the United States, several studies have quantified the cost savings associated with increased medication adherence for a number of chronic conditions.

## The significant cost savings associated with high medication adherence





	Low Adherence Care Costs	High Adherence Care Costs	Savings per Year
 <b>Diabetes</b>	\$8,867	\$4,570	48%
 <b>High Cholesterol</b>	\$6,888	\$3,924	43%
 <b>High Blood Pressure</b>	\$10,916	\$6,752	38%
 <b>Multiple Ailments</b>	\$16,498	\$8,886	46%

Chart shows U.S. data. Source: Medical Care, 2005, vol 43, n6, pp 521-530, SOKOL Michael C, MCGUIGAN Kimberly A, VERBRUGGE Robert R, EPSTEIN Robert S.

<sup>4</sup> "Reducing the Health Care and Societal Cost of Disease: The role of Pharmaceuticals", The Conference Board of Canada, 2013

<sup>5</sup> ibid

# Strategies to increase drug adherence

There are a number of tools and strategies available – or currently in development – designed to address patient prescription drug behaviour. Even better, there are easy, practical ways that you can begin to put these tools and strategies into action now.

## ✓ HEALTH LITERACY AND EDUCATION MATERIAL

Research has shown that when patients are provided with information about their disease and what they can experience by following the prescribed drug therapy, medication adherence will increase.

**Tip** – Start to create your own health literacy outreach program. This can be as simple as introducing the topic of disease management in your employee communications throughout the year and providing links to non-profits like the Canadian Diabetes Association which have a wealth of education materials on their websites.

## ✓ INCREASED COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PATIENT AND HEALTH CARE TEAM

Establishing an open dialogue and more frequent “touch points” between the patient and their doctor, pharmacist or other health care professional can improve relationships and trigger behaviour changes.

**Tip** – Consider providing access to onsite health care professionals, or facilitate access to a general practitioner for your employees. And as part of your health literacy outreach program, encourage employees to “inter-connect” the various health care professionals in their lives – between doctor and pharmacist for example, or specialist and family physician.



## ✓ PHARMACY INTERVENTIONS

A pharmacy's computer alerts system can be used to trigger communication with a patient. And the role of pharmacists in drug management can be critical. Pharmacists prescribe medication, extend prescriptions, inject vaccines and provide counseling services – yet many employees aren't aware of these additional services.

**Tip** – Using your intranet or in an email communication, encourage your employees to leverage the knowledge and services offered by pharmacists and pharmacy websites. There are also mobile applications designed specifically to help manage taking prescriptions properly. Resources can include simple refill reminders – or call back programs that remind patients when refills can be picked up.

## ✓ PATIENT ASSOCIATIONS

A great deal of patient support is available from non-profits, such as the Heart and Stroke Association and Canadian Diabetes Association, either online or in person. These organizations often have local chapters and support groups.

**Tip** – Create a directory of these resources for your employees, including local information. Make this easily available and highly visible on your intranet, or provide it in an email communication as part of your health literacy outreach program.

## ✓ MANUFACTURER OFFERINGS

Often for higher-cost products, Patient Assistance Programs (PAP) have been established to provide patient information and support. Manufacturers are in the unique position to assist patients with their adherence given their resources, capabilities and deep understanding of both disease biology and the importance of proper medication use.

**Tip** – Many patients are not aware of these programs. Make sure to highlight PAPs in your health literacy outreach programs. Check to see whether your insurance carrier has relationships with PAPs that can be leveraged to support your members.

## ✓ TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGY

Simple packaging and containers that separate drug doses can go a long way to keep a patient on schedule with their drug therapy (for example, some pills come in monthly blister packs that help verify which doses were taken).

In addition, medication alarm clocks can remind patients when to take their dosage – and there are several mobile and web applications that can be customized to a patient's dosage requirements and lifestyle. These include programs and apps that prompt a patient by text or voicemail to take or refill a medication, and apps that can direct a patient to pharmacies with the lowest cost prescriptions for a particular medication.

The range of solutions and continuing innovation here is important, as the reality is that a personalized approach is required to ensure long-term behaviour change.

**Tip** – Consult with your insurance carrier to build a tip sheet or list of tools and technologies that you can provide to your employees.

### START MAKING A DIFFERENCE NOW

Non-adherence to prescribed medication is a problem that can affect the health of your employees, your organization's productivity and your benefit plan costs. While driving behaviour change can be challenging, there are some simple, practical steps you can take on your own and with the help of your insurance carrier that can increase the chances that your plan members will take their medications as prescribed.

## *Stay in the loop on packaging innovations*

Technical advancements are impressive, as manufacturers have developed devices that assist and monitor patient drug adherence.

### TAKE-N-SLIDE

Customizable and reusable pill bottle label that helps in dosage tracking for once-a-day medication.

### VITALITY GLOWCAP

A chip inside the cap monitors when the pill bottle is opened, and wirelessly relays alerts to patient or caregiver.

### AND COMING SOON TO A PHARMACY NEAR YOU!

More innovations are on the way.

### PROTEUS BIOMEDICAL SMARTPILL

This an ingestible sensor. It captures the exact time the medication is ingested, and relays information to the patient's smartphone where the app communicates to their support network.





# The importance of taking your medication as prescribed

If you're like more than one in three Canadians,<sup>6</sup> you're managing a chronic condition that requires consistent medication to improve your health and keep your illness in check.

Unfortunately, many Canadians don't follow their prescribed drug therapy – whether that's missing a dose, not filling/re-filling prescriptions, mixing up dosage schedules or taking medication at the wrong time. While following your medication plan can be complicated, or simply a nuisance at times, it's critical to keeping you healthy.

If you find you're not managing your medication as well as you could be, here are some things you can do:



**Read up.** Find out more about your illness – and how your medication can help you feel better, both now and down the road. Talk to your health care professional about your condition – and ask about resources that can help your understanding. And talk to your employer or Sun Life for the educational material they have on hand.



**Talk it out.** Stay in touch with your doctor and pharmacist and let them know if you're having any trouble with your medication. Remember, you have more than one health care partner – use the entire network you have available. For instance, if you use a local pharmacist, go see them if you have questions.



**Have a routine.** Do you ever forget to take your medication? Try setting up a daily routine that involves taking it at the same time each day or associating it with a routine task, such as brushing your teeth.



**Get support.** There are support groups available for most chronic conditions. Check online for groups that can give you the help, information and support you need to stick to your drug therapy.



**Get technical.** Smartphone apps and website programs can be very handy tools and can be customized to your dosage needs and your lifestyle. Take a look at what's available and find a tool that fits your needs best.

## QUESTIONS?

When it comes to group benefits and drug coverage, we're here to help you understand what is available to you. You can contact Sun Life Financial's Customer Care Centre at 1-800-361-6212 any business day between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. (EST).

***Plan Sponsors:** Contact your Sun Life Group Benefits Representative to order additional copies of this fact sheet.*

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<sup>6</sup> 9000 Points of Care: Improving Access to Affordable Healthcare, April 2013

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# *Notes*



## *About Sun Life*

A market leader in group benefits, Sun Life Financial serves more than 1 in 6 Canadians, in over 12,000 corporate, association, affinity and creditor groups across Canada.

Our core values – integrity, service excellence, customer focus and building value – are at the heart of who we are and how we do business.

Sun Life Financial and its partners have operations in 22 key markets worldwide including Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Japan, Indonesia, India, China and Bermuda.

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