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Helping Patients Manage Their CHF

By Chandler Anderson, B.S.N., R.N., C.E.N.

One method for evaluating successful outpatient management of Congestive Heart Failure (CHF) is to consider the number and frequency of inpatient admissions for CHF exacerbations. When readmission rates for patients with CHF reaches up to 30 percent in some areas, it would appear that the outpatient medical care given to these patients is poor.



Chandler Anderson

However, high rates of inpatient admissions are not necessarily the result of poor outpatient medical care. Instead, they may reflect patients' lack of understanding about the daily management of their disease. Outpatient care that includes strong patient education regarding management for CHF will help to prevent, or at least prolong the time in-between, multiple re-admissions.

Understanding and Prevention First

Basic CHF patient education should include prevention of exacerbations and steps to take if exacerbations occur. Fundamental to exacerbation prevention is prevention of fluid overload. Patients need to understand the importance of preventing fluid retention and how complying with dietary sodium restrictions helps them to do that.

Understanding the basic relationship between sodium consumption and fluid retention is only part of the process though. Patient educators need to provide patients with examples of foods that are low in sodium, taste good, have a reasonable shelf life and fit the patient's budget. If they don't do so, patients may find sodium rich, processed foods easier to use and more financially appealing.

Being able to identify symptoms of fluid overload, such as a significant daily weight increase or worsening exertional dyspnea, is also essential. Patients who are unable to recognize these basic symptoms of overload

are more likely to present later in the course of the exacerbation and have a more complex hospitalization course.

Correcting an Occurrence

Once patients are able to identify fluid overload, they need to learn what steps to take if CHF exacerbation occurs. They need to understand what symptoms require immediate treatment, such as rest dyspnea or prolonged chest discomfort, versus those that may only warrant a call to the doctor's office, such as a change in the amount of pedal edema.

Providers should also review patients' medication regimens to ensure that they understand the reason for taking each medication, as well as any possible interactions with common over-the-counter medications.

Finally, patients should be provided with activity restrictions, if applicable, and receive assistance with smoking cessation if they are motivated to do so.

Including these essential elements in a CHF patient's education will help prevent recurrent admissions that expose patients to increased financial and health burdens and decrease their quality of life.

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Cardiac Care 2006 Author/Article Index



January 2006

- Freddie Thronson Jr., A.R.N.P.C., M.S.N.**
Synchronizing Care for Consistency p. 15
- Patricia Lucken, R.N., M.S.N., F.N.P.C.**
Tracking Performance for Quality p. 16
- Maggie Barnett, N.P.**
To the Cardiac Care Team p. 18

February 2006

- Rebecca Angerstein, C.C.N.S.**
Combining Forces for Quality Care p. 15
- Jacqueline Gannuscio, M.S.N., A.R.N.P.**
Report from ACC Board of Trustees Meeting p. 16
- Michelle Nickolaus, C.R.N.P.**
PaACC Chapter Elects CCA Liaisons p. 17
- Ellen Langrehr, R.N, M.S., C.C.R.N., A.C.N.P.**
To the Cardiac Care Team p. 18

March 2006

- Michele Brocato, P.A.-C.**
Searching for PAD with Diabetic Patients p. 15
- Jonathan Skillings, P.A.-C.**
CCAs Need to Know COCATS p. 16
- Suzanne Hughes, M.S.N., R.N.**
Discover Cardiosource p. 17
- Laura Wicks, R.N.-C.**
On Returning to New Orleans p. 18
- Julie H. Webster A.P.R.N., M.N.**
To the Cardiac Care Team p. 19

April 2006

- Jill Lucca, R.N., M.S.N., C.N.P.**
CV Certification Has Wings p. 13
- Marjorie King, M.D., F.A.C.C., F.A.A.C.V.P.R.**
CMS Expands Rehab Coverage p. 14
- Suzanne Hughes, M.S.N., R.N.**
Discover Cardiosource p. 16

May 2006

- Brenda Garrett, R.N., M.S.N., C.N.P.**
Tapping Potential at the Chapter Level p. 13
- Cynthia Adams, N.P.**
To the Cardiac Care Team p. 16
- Suzanne Hughes, M.S.N., R.N.**
Discover Cardiosource p. 16

June 2006

- Kathleen K. Zarling, R.N., A.P.R.N.-B.C., F.A.A.C.V.P.R.**
Extending the Care Continuum p.13
- Dody Lapworth, M.S.N., A.P.R.N.-B.C.**
Book Review: Electronic Health Records: Transforming Your Medical Practice p.14
- Suzanne Hughes, M.S.N., R.N.**
Cardiosource Offers CE for Nurses p.16
- Carolyn L. Lekavich, R.N., A.N.P., M.H.S.-C.I.**
To the Cardiac Care Team p.16

July 2006

- Jill Lucca, R.N., M.S.N., C.N.P.**
Counseling to Meet More Aggressive Goals p.15
- Suzanne Hughes, M.S.N., R.N.**
Reaffirming Prevention p.18
- Barbara Fletcher, R.N., M.N., F.A.A.N.**
To the Cardiac Care Team p.18

August 2006

- Gregory L. Ehle, M.M.Sc., P.A.-C.**
Joining the Online Community at ACC p.15
- Suzanne Hughes, M.S.N., R.N.**
One-Stop Information Source p.16
- Julie Benson, N.P.**
Illinois Board Votes on CCA Member p.18

September 2006

- Edward Teaman Jr., P.A.-C.**
Making the Hypertension, HF and AF Connection p.15
- Janet B. Long, M.S.N., A.C.N.P., F.A.H.A.**
ACC Initiates CV Drug Therapy SAP p.17
- Maggie Barnett, N.P.**
Reflections on the Impact of the CCA Decision p.19

October 2006

- Jacqueline Gannuscio, N.P.**
EHR in Cardiology p. 15
- Brenda Garrett, R.N.**
ESC Recognizes Team Impact p. 17

November 2006

- John Brady, R.N., C.C.R.N., and Pat Lucken, R.N., F.N.P.-C.**
Rapid Response Team Success Adds to a Golden Year p. 15
- Carolyn Lekavich, N.P., Katherine Hoercher, R.N. and Eva Kline-Rogers, R.N.**
Looking Ahead at ACC.07 and i2 Summit 2007 p. 17
- Suzanne Hughes, M.S.N., R.N.**
Working in Parallel with CVD and Diabetes p. 18

December 2006

- Chandler Anderson, B.S.N., R.N., C.E.N.**
Helping Patients Manage Their CHF p. 16

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