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COVID-19 Sheds Continued Light on the Importance of Chronic Disease Management

As the nation continues to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals are reminded to keep their chronic conditions top of mind

ST. LOUIS, March 31, 2021 – Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has had far reaching impacts on nearly every aspect of daily life. For many individuals with chronic diseases, the past several months have presented great challenges as they work to navigate their health care needs and the risks of contracting COVID-19.

As the nation continues to weather the pandemic, health care providers are urging patients to keep their chronic conditions top of mind and seek the care they need to properly manage them to avoid future health concerns.

“Since the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 has impacted chronic disease management because it has limited access to medical checkups, medication, healthy foods and safe places to engage in physical activity – all of which are all important factors in keeping chronic conditions under control,” said Commander Patrick Harper of the U.S. Public Health Service, a pharmacist and alumnus of University of Health Sciences and Pharmacy in St. Louis and a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Field Assignee to the Illinois Department of Health’s Division of Chronic Disease. “During the past year, these barriers have resulted in an increased neglect for chronic disease management which has the potential to create negative short-term and long-term effects for patients.”

Chronic diseases are long-term conditions that progress slowly over time. Examples of these conditions include heart disease, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). For those with these chronic conditions, chronic disease management is essential as it provides medical care, support and resources to help individuals better manage their conditions on day-to-day basis.

“Chronic disease management happens after an individual is diagnosed with a chronic disease,” explained Harper. “These are the steps patients take to keep their chronic conditions under control so they don’t cause severe health problems or death.”

Harper notes that proper chronic disease management is essential because the symptoms of chronic diseases and their impacts on daily life aren't always apparent.

"Neglecting chronic disease management can create health erosion by allowing the conditions to negatively impact the body as if they were never properly diagnosed in the first place," said Harper. "Patients can't see or feel the short-term changes that are occurring with their health and then those short-term changes become long-term, irreversible issues."

With COVID-19 creating barriers for individuals to get to in-person medical appointments, and many individuals still feeling uncomfortable going to the doctor's office due to their fears of contracting COVID-19, health providers have continued to adapt to help their patients manage their chronic diseases.

From the increased use of telehealth services for follow-up doctor visits to online diabetes prevention classes and drive thru testing services, there are a wealth of new options for chronic care management. In addition, local pharmacies continue to play an important role in chronic disease management and overall health.

"Pharmacists are often considered the most accessible health care providers in the country, and the pharmacy setting may be one where patients that are concerned about COVID-19 can feel more comfortable because there is greater flexibility to stop in at non-peak hours to avoid crowds," noted Harper. "In addition, for patients who are unable to see their primary care providers on a regular basis, many pharmacists have the resources necessary to help them navigate their chronic disease management needs. Pharmacists can provide a variety of services including routine vaccinations, medication adjustments and assistance with interpreting results from at-home glucose and blood pressure monitors."

Regardless of what path to health individuals with chronic conditions take, Harper stresses that health care providers across the U.S. are committed to maximizing safety for patients so they continue to feel comfortable getting their health needs met during this historic time.

"We know that chronic diseases can kill if they are not properly managed," said Harper. "I encourage individuals to reach out to their providers to discuss their concerns and make a plan to stay well. By being their own best health care advocates, individuals can continue to effectively manage their chronic diseases to ensure they lead a long, happy and healthy life once COVID-19 is in our rearview mirror."

To learn more about chronic diseases and chronic disease management, visit [cdc.gov/chronicdisease](https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease) or www.dph.illinois.gov/topics-services/diseases-and-conditions/chronic-diseases.

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