

Tricare Promotes Mail-Order Pharmacy Option

By Donna Miles
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WASHINGTON, Oct. 8, 2010 – As Tricare officials explore ways to control costs while continuing to provide the best health care possible, they're encouraging beneficiaries, especially those taking long-term medications, to get their prescriptions delivered to their doorsteps.

Navy Rear Adm. Christine S. Hunter, deputy director for the Tricare Management Activity, cited increased usage of the health care system's home delivery option as a win-win situation that saves patients, as well as the government, money.

Tricare's almost 9.7 million beneficiaries filled 10.5 million prescriptions through home delivery in 2009, officials noted. That's up from just over 9 million in 2007, but still represents only about 8 percent of the 130 million prescriptions filled in 2009.

Thirty-seven percent of those prescriptions -- just over 48 million -- were filled at military medical facilities, which is the least expensive delivery method for the Defense Department, and patients pay no copayment, Hunter said.

But getting prescriptions filled at a military facility isn't always convenient for beneficiaries, who are increasingly turning to retail pharmacies within the Tricare network.

Last year, beneficiaries filled more than half of their prescriptions -- 71.4 million -- at retail pharmacies. This is the fastest-growing of the Tricare delivery options, officials noted, up from more than 67 million retail pharmacy-provided prescriptions in 2008 and just under 63 million in 2007.

While retail pharmacies may be convenient and often the best choice for patients needing short-term medications, Hunter noted that they're also the most expensive, all around.

Beneficiaries pay the same co-payment for a 30-day supply of medication at the corner drugstore that they'd pay for a 90-day supply delivered through Tricare's home-delivery option.

“So the cost to them is one-third” using home delivery, Hunter said. “That’s a real incentive there.”

Mail order is the hands-down best choice even for those who value convenience over cost, she said. “I don’t know how it gets more convenient than in your own mailbox at your house, not having to go anywhere to get your prescription,” she said.

Tricare can mail order prescriptions almost anywhere in the world, including deployment sites where specific medications may not be available. The only exceptions are extremely hot climates that may affect some temperature-sensitive drugs.

In addition, beneficiaries who sign up for home delivery can get automatic refills -- a big plus for anyone taking medications for a chronic, long-term condition.

“We’ll send you an email saying, ‘It looks like your refill is due. Unless you say you don’t need it for some reason, we are going to ship it,’” Hunter said.

That eliminates last-minute dashes to the drugstore when a prescription runs out, or worse, gaps before patients resume taking the drugs they need.

“The key to staying healthy and using medications to help you manage your health is to take them,” Hunter said. “And if you don’t have them, you can’t take them.”

Regardless of where beneficiaries get their medications, they’re protected by a safety feature built into the Tricare pharmacy program, Hunter said. The patient data transaction service monitors the medications every Tricare beneficiary receives to flag potential adverse drug interactions or allergic reactions.

“Both the military services and Tricare are very focused on prevention and keeping people healthy,” Hunter said. “All of these programs are designed to support patients partnering with us to stay healthy.”

Partnering is a new emphasis in health care, she said, with patients playing an increasingly key role in their health.

“We are really moving toward partnering for health, and giving you the information and the services you need to be active and healthy for as long as possible,” Hunter said.