

NEWS RELEASE

For immediate release

Chronic health conditions can get worse over the holidays

TORONTO, Dec. 22, 2014 – A little forethought and planning can help ensure that your loved ones with chronic disease don't get sicker this holiday season, according to Laurie Poole.

“Research shows that people with COPD – Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease – and Congestive Heart Failure (CHF) tend to be hospitalized more over the holidays,” she says.

Poole, a Registered Nurse, heads up Ontario's Telehomecare program for the non-profit Ontario Telemedicine Network, where she is Vice President of Telemedicine Solutions.

She says that dealing with a chronic health condition is challenging at the best of times but an even bigger feat over the holidays. Social events typically mean more to eat – and generally more indulgent food choices – staying up late and less exercise. As well, respiratory virus infections tend to increase at this time of year.

A 2010 Hamilton, Ontario study found that this time of year is a genuine risk factor for people with COPD, who end up in hospital more often during the holidays. The researchers, led by Neil Johnston, an epidemiologist with the Firestone Institute for Respiratory Health, monitored 71 people with COPD from December to May. They found 47 exacerbations – about 6.7/week – occurred during the holiday period, while 63 exacerbations – about 4.3/week – occurred during the remainder of winter.

“The researchers tell us the increase is likely related to social activity and more circulating respiratory virus infections and fostered by less access to medical care over the holidays.” The study was published in the *Canadian Respiratory Journal*.

Poole says a 2013 University of Colorado Medical School study found a spike in CHF hospitalizations over the holidays with a peak in January. Data on almost one million CHF hospitalizations that occurred between 1994 and 2007 showed more admissions, longer length of stay in hospital and worsening conditions at this time of year. A seasonal increased risk of pneumonia and other respiratory illnesses, along with the fact many patients put off seeing their doctor over the holidays, may be the key culprits, according to lead researcher and cardiologist Dr. David Kao.

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“Telehomecare provides remote monitoring for patients with COPD and CHF,” Poole says. The program puts easy-to-use equipment like a scale and blood pressure cuff into the homes of chronic disease patients who get weekly health coaching from a nurse or respiratory therapist who monitors their daily vital signs.

“Potential exacerbations that might lead to an Emergency Room visit or a hospitalization can be caught early, keeping the patient healthier and at home.”

Poole recommends that anyone with a chronic condition use some simple strategies to stay as well as possible.

For example, she recommends that patients make healthy food and drink choices as often as possible and get regular, condition-appropriate exercise. If you have a respiratory condition, she recommends patients avoid allergens and triggers like air pollution from candles and wood fires, as well as temperature changes. If you experience a worsening of your condition, don't put off seeking medical help until after the holidays.

“It can be difficult to acknowledge your limitations when you have a chronic condition and hard for families to see loved ones struggling,” says Poole. “But the good news is, with some forethought and planning, there are strategies to make the holidays easier to manage and as enjoyable as possible.”

About OTN

The world leader in telemedicine, OTN helps Ontarians get more out of the health care system by bridging the distance of time and geography to bring more patients the care they need, where and when they need it. Using innovative technology, OTN streamlines the healthcare process, while also expanding the way knowledge is shared and how the medical community interacts with each other and with patients. An independent, not-for-profit organization, OTN is funded by the Government of Ontario and Canada Health Infoway. For more information please visit www.otn.ca and www.otnresults.ca.

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For more information: about Telehomecare and chronic disease management visit: www.OntarioTelehomecare.ca or www.RxTelehomecare.ca.

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