



Step Therapy Reform: Dermatological Conditions

Overview of dermatological conditions

Dermatological conditions affect millions of Americans. Chronic skin conditions, in particular, can be physically and psychologically painful and debilitating.¹ Examples include psoriasis, atopic dermatitis or eczema, and psoriatic arthritis. Currently, 31.6 million people (10.1%) in the U.S. have some form of eczema and approximately 7.5 million have psoriasis.² These skin conditions significantly impact individuals' quality of life and self-esteem. For instance, studies have shown that individuals with eczema and psoriasis are at an increased risk of depression and anxiety.³ Individuals with such conditions may also experience social isolation and work-related problems. As a result, they may experience increased stress, which can trigger or exacerbate their skin conditions. This creates a negative cycle that can be difficult for individuals with these conditions to break.⁴

What is step therapy?

Step therapy policies, also referred to as “fail first,” require insured individuals to try and fail on alternative treatments, sometimes with adverse effects, before the insurer or pharmacy benefit manager will cover the prescribed treatment.⁵

Problems with step therapy

Step therapy policies can be unethical and inconsistent with standards of care, resulting in interference with the practitioner-patient relationship and significant delays in access to prescribed treatments.⁶

Step therapy requirements can be especially burdensome for some patients who need highly individualized care. For them, trying and failing on alternative treatments may not be in their best interest.⁷ This could be due to lack of efficacy, lack of therapeutic equivalence, the patient's preference regarding the medication and its associated side effects, or clinical characteristics unique to the patient that necessitate one treatment over another.⁸ Yet, the time that the patient spends trying and failing on the alternative treatment could cause the patient's condition to progress or relapse due to the treatment's ineffectiveness.⁹

¹ <https://www.health.com/condition/skin-conditions/4-skin-conditions-that-can-signal-other-health-problems>

² <https://nationaleczema.org/research/eczema-facts/>; <https://www.aad.org/media/stats-numbers>

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6947493/>;
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2928071/>

⁴ <https://www.dermatologytimes.com/view/how-stress-impacts-chronic-skin-conditions>

⁵ <https://aimedalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Aimed-Alliance-Primary-Care-Survey-Report.pdf>

⁶ <https://aimedalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Aimed-Alliance-Primary-Care-Survey-Report.pdf>

⁷ <https://aimedalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Aimed-Alliance-Primary-Care-Survey-Report.pdf>

⁸ <https://aimedalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Aimed-Alliance-Step-Therapy-in-Medicare-Advantage-Plans-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

⁹ <https://aimedalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Aimed-Alliance-Step-Therapy-in-Medicare-Advantage-Plans-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

How does step therapy negatively impact patients with dermatological conditions?

Step therapy can allow chronic skin conditions to worsen, undermine patients' quality of life, and delay access to effective treatment.¹⁰ A study published in 2020 that looked at individuals with psoriatic arthritis found that patients with this condition who were required to go through step therapy had 25 percent lower odds of treatment effectiveness compared to individuals who did not have to go through access restrictions.¹¹

Another study that looked at individuals with psoriasis noted that the patients who received biologic therapies reported higher treatment satisfaction than biologic-naïve patients.¹² Yet, despite treatment guidelines recommending that treatment reflect the severity of the disease, many plans impose step therapy protocols that may limit prescribers in their ability to immediately treat individuals with moderate to severe psoriasis as intended.¹³ This leads to undertreatment of such patients. For example, a 2016 survey of dermatologists found that more than two-thirds of respondents believed insurance approval processes negatively affected at least one patient per day, resulting in a significant limitation on the physicians' ability to treat patients.

Patient story

A patient with palmar psoriasis tried numerous topical treatments and steroid injections with no success and was worried that his work would be jeopardized if his condition was not controlled.¹⁴ He received a sample of an oral medication from his provider, and within four weeks his hands were clear, allowing him to continue work. However, once the sample ran out, the insurer refused to approve the prescribed treatment despite its demonstrated success. The provider and the patient worked with the insurance company for months to get the treatment approved, impacting the patient's quality of life.

¹⁰ <https://www.patientaccesscollaborative.org/videos/2021/1/21/step-therapy-and-skin-conditions>

¹¹ https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s41669-019-0152-1?author_access_token=wn16qxqmbu8Y_A-omSP0Zve4RwlQNchNByi7wbcMAY7RP9W-hCIF0ibQHi4l6PB9b5joHSXGA0k7qbFjo6QnM0Ej28kBPej-vh8ykFXYLJMUTTqkvuDvm1VBKf0Bb_cQSxdQGJP3vTlux9A0lxUCUQ%3D%3D;

<https://www.managedhealthcareexecutive.com/view/impact-step-therapy-patients-taking-biologics>

¹² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4476483/>

¹³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5394561/>

¹⁴ <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/opinion/os-ed-step-therapy-myword-061515-20150612-story.html>