In Finland, a comprehensive and nationwide Asthma Programme was undertaken from 1994 to 2004 to improve asthma care and prevent the predicted increase in costs. The main goal was to lessen the burden of asthma on individuals and society.

**Goals of the Asthma Programme**

Five specific goals were set, for example, decreasing the number of days patients were hospitalised by 50% and reducing annual costs per patient by 50%. The programme comprised both evidence-based management guidelines, which have been available to general practitioners and nurses via the Internet since 2000, and an action plan with defined tools to achieve the goals.

The action plan focused on implementation of new knowledge, especially for primary care. At that time the new medical knowledge was: “Asthma is an inflammatory disease and should be treated as such from the very beginning”. The key to implementation was an effective network of asthma-responsible professionals and development of an evaluation strategy. In 1997 Finnish pharmacies were included in the Pharmacy Programme, and in 2002 a Childhood Asthma Mini-Programme was launched.

**Results: The burden of asthma has decreased**

As a result of this programme, the burden of asthma in Finland has decreased considerably. Key indicators have fallen significantly: Number of hospital days by 86% from around 110,000 (1993) to 15,000 (2010) and disability by 76% from 1993 to 2003. In recent years, only a few asthma deaths/year under the age of 65 have been recorded in Finland (total population 5.3 million). In young age groups there is virtually no asthma mortality. In 1993 the number of patients needing regular medication for persistent asthma (entitled to 75% reimbursement of medicine costs) was around 135,000. By 2004 this number was around 212,000, indicating a 57% increase and reflecting earlier and more effective intervention. The most remarkable increase was in the use of inhaled corticosteroids during the early years of the programme (1994–1999).

**Prevalence is up; costs are down**

In spite of increasing prevalence, the overall costs related to asthma (compensation for disability, medicines, hospital care and outpatient doctor visits) levelled off and then continued to decrease. This has been in stark contrast to what was predicted. The overall costs of asthma in 1993 were circa €285 million, including loss of productivity. By 2007, this figure had dropped to €230 million.

Based on the 1993 trends, the 2007 costs would have been around €800 million. A conservative estimate of the potential savings for the year 2007 alone was around €300 million. Annual costs per patient attributable to asthma have been reduced by more than 50%. The extra costs of planning and implementing the programme have been small, primarily because most of the activities were carried out as part of the routine work of the clinicians and administrators.

**Patient benefits: Early detection, timely treatment**

For the patients with asthma, the main improvement has been early detection of the disease and its timely treatment: “Hit early and hit hard!” Patients with chronic asthma have been educated to employ guided self-management, an approach that encourages them to be proactive in preventing asthma attacks. Effective networking of specialists with general practitioners (n=200), asthma nurses (n=700) and pharmacists (n=700) has also considerably improved the overall asthma care in Finland.

**Expanding the programme’s scope**

The Finnish experience shows that it is possible to considerably reduce the morbidity of asthma and its impact on individuals, as well as on society. Worrying trends continue to be the still slightly increasing prevalence of asthma and growing drug costs.

A new Allergy Programme 2008–2018, which includes asthma, has been launched in Finland to expand the good asthma results to all allergic conditions and to take a step from treatment to prevention. The long-term aim is to have an impact on the incidence of both asthma and allergies.