

# Increasing Access to Inhaled Medicines for COPD and Asthma

## CASE STUDY

### What happened when inhalers became more difficult to obtain in Nigeria?

The importance of affordable inhalers for the treatment of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma is illustrated by what happened when they became less available in Nigeria.

COPD and asthma affect **13 million Nigerians and currently cause an estimated 20,000 deaths per year.**(1) On current trends, chronic respiratory deaths in Nigeria are forecast to more than double to 47,000 in 2050.(2)

A 2022 survey of primary care doctors reported limited knowledge of global asthma treatment guidelines, limited access to lung function testing facilities, lack of available and affordable asthma medicines, and poor patient adherence (3).

A nationwide survey of asthma and COPD medicines conducted in 2020 across 128 pharmacies revealed that none were available in at least 80% of the surveyed pharmacies. The most frequently available medications were inhaled corticosteroids (ICS), which were available in just 16% of pharmacies and ICS, combined with long acting beta agonist (LABA), which were available in 48% of pharmacies. Inhaled corticosteroids were not available in any public pharmacy nationwide.(4)

*The ripple effect of these circumstances on patients is deeply concerning. For those without access to the right information, financial constraints can push them towards counterfeit medication, risking drug-adverse effects, drug resistance, treatment failure and even death.*

**Oluwakemi Ebire, Famasi Africa (5)**

The Forum of International Respiratory Societies (FIRS) is calling on the Nigerian and all governments, industry, global health agencies, and donors to take action to increase access to inhaled medicines by addressing the follow five priorities:

- **Policy:** Inclusion of the latest evidence-based inhalers in all COPD and asthma treatment guidelines, essential medicine lists, and UHC reimbursement lists.
- **Product:** Improved availability of recommended inhaled medicines by facilitating product registration, technology transfer, voluntary licensing agreements, and participation in the WHO Prequalification Programme, Collaborative Registration Procedure, and other programs.
- **Price:** Reductions in inhaler prices from bulk purchasing, pooled procurement, tiered/differential pricing, generic alternatives, and other proven strategies.
- **Primary Care:** Increased training for primary healthcare providers to diagnose and manage COPD and asthma, including improved access to spirometry and peak flow measurement tools.
- **Patient Advocacy:** Investments in campaigns to increase community awareness of COPD and asthma and destigmatize the use of inhalers.



# What happened when inhalers became more difficult to obtain in Nigeria?

None of the inhaled medicines on the [Nigerian Essential Medicines List](#) (EML) were affordable - the cheapest inhaled corticosteroid cost 3.5 days wages for a 30-day supply.

The most available medicines were oral corticosteroids and oral salbutamol which are not on the [World Health Organization \(WHO\) EML](#) because of the risk of harm when used long-term. The authors urged the engagement of all stakeholders to review existing policies in Nigeria regarding access to COPD and asthma medicines to improve availability and affordability.

A significant reduction in the availability and affordability of inhaled medicines to treat COPD and asthma occurred in August 2023, following the decision by the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) to cease direct operations in Nigeria and contract Worldwide Commercial Ventures Limited to distribute their medicines.(6)

The challenges that emerged after GSK's departure from Nigeria in 2023 illustrate the problems that occur when inhaled medicines are not widely available or affordable.

## Increased prices

With 95% of asthma patients in Nigeria using GSK's Ventolin inhaler,(7) its withdrawal from the market led to shortages and inflation of the already high prices on inhaled therapies.(8) For example, Seretide® a GSK inhaler, typically priced around ₦6000 increased to between ₦30,000 and ₦70,000 as a result of limited availability.(9)

**August [2023] that was when the horror and nightmare began. I couldn't find the inhaler. I was ready to pay any amount for it but it was nowhere to be found. All the big, retail and even small pharmacies I knew in Lagos didn't have it.**

**Rose Daniel, 28 years, Mother of two, Nigeria (5)**

## Use of counterfeit medicines

The limited access to inhalers led to a proliferation of counterfeit and unregistered products in the Nigerian market. These substandard products pose significant health risks, including exacerbated symptoms and increased mortality.(10)

The [National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control](#) (NAFDAC) has issued warnings against the use of unregistered inhalers, emphasizing the legal and health risks associated with such products.(11) Despite these efforts, the influx of counterfeit medications continues to threaten patient health.

## Use of unproven treatments

Many patients resort to less effective unproven treatments when inhalers are not available, including oral medication such as salbutamol and corticosteroid tablets and traditional medicines. This shift has resulted in higher hospitalizations and a general decline in respiratory health management.(12)

# What happened when inhalers became more difficult to obtain in Nigeria?

***Urgent action is needed to increase access to inhaled medicines across Nigeria.***

## Solutions

When inhalers are not available or affordable, governments need to take action to ensure a competitive market for inhaled medicines with multiple suppliers of quality, affordable products, a well-trained health workforce to diagnose and treat patients, and an educated patient population.

Here are some of the strategies the Nigerian government could pursue:

- Work with GSK and the new third-party distributor to ensure a robust supply of quality, affordable, and effective inhaled medicines.
- Facilitate partnerships between international and local pharmaceutical companies to transfer technologies and know-how to produce inhaled medicines locally.
- Incentivize local manufacturing of inhalers by offering tax breaks, subsidies, and/or grants to Nigerian pharmaceutical companies.
- Support NAFDAC to ensure all local inhalers meet WHO standards, building public trust in local brands.
- Fast-track approvals for quality-assured imported generics and locally-made inhalers.
- Work with regional blocs like the the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to harmonize standards and speed up importation from neighboring countries.
- Remove or reduce tariffs and VAT on inhalers from WHO-prequalified sources, temporarily until the supply crisis lifts.
- Explore pooled procurement strategies via the [African Medical Supplies Platform](#) or partnerships with regional organizations to reduce the cost of inhalers.

- Update the Nigerian EML to include combination budesonide and formoterol inhalers and remove salbutamol in oral form, which is no longer recommended by WHO.
- Include the WHO recommended inhalers for COPD and asthma in the [National Health Insurance Authority](#) (NHIA) benefit package to reduce out-of-pocket costs for patients.
- Ensure inhaler availability in primary healthcare centers and public hospitals.
- Train healthcare providers on asthma diagnosis, inhaler technique, and guideline-based management to increase demand and ensure correct use.
- Enable community health workers and private pharmacists to distribute inhaled medicines, especially in rural areas. A 2024 study found that with training, Nigerian pharmacists could significantly improve inhaler usage among patients with COPD and asthma, highlighting the critical role of pharmacists in managing chronic respiratory diseases.(13)
- Launch public education campaigns to increase awareness about the benefits of inhaled medicines for COPD and asthma, the importance of proper inhaler use, and to reduce stigma.



# Join us!

**Join us to secure access to quality, affordable, and effective inhalers for all!**

**The Forum of International Respiratory Societies (FIRS)** - the world's leading international professional respiratory societies - is supporting a campaign to improve the availability of quality, affordable, and effective inhalers for COPD and asthma in low resource, high-burden settings.

The campaign is engaging governments, UN and global health agencies, industry, donors, patient advocacy and civil society organizations, and media to support the actions required to transform access to inhaled medicines.

Investing greater resources to meet the urgent need for inhaled medicines now will accelerate achievement of both Global NCD Action Plan targets and the Sustainable Development Goals.

## Members of FIRS include:

- American College Chest Physicians
- American Thoracic Society
- Asian Pacific Society of Respirology
- Asociación Latino Americana De Tórax
- European Respiratory Society
- International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Diseases
- Global Initiative for Asthma
- Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease
- Pan African Thoracic Society

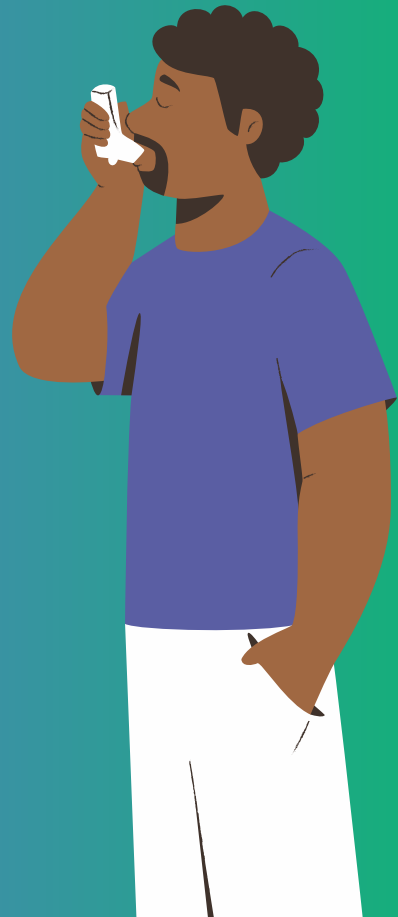
## Contact

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# Sources

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## Key documents

- [WHO Global NCD Action Plan](#)
- [NCD Countdown 2030](#)
- [GOLD 2025 COPD Guidelines](#)
- [GINA 2024 Asthma Guidelines](#)
- [Policy Brief on Access to Medicines and Medical Devices for NCDs](#)
- [Global Asthma Report](#)
- [WHO NCD Country Capacity Surveys](#)

