TEANECK, N. J.—The group gathered around a conference table at Holy Name Medical Center and flipped through binders until they found the music for Chloe Fernandez’s favorite song. Taking deep breaths, they raised their harmonicas to their lips and blew the first notes of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.”

Chloe, 9 years old, of Ridgewood, N.J., is one of the youngest participants in the hospital’s “Harmonicare” weekly classes. The year-old program provides free harmonica instruction to people suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD, and other lung ailments.

“We don’t judge when somebody messes up,” said Chloe. “It’s supportive.”

Karine Shnorhokian, a nurse manager at Holy Name Medical Center, said she got the idea for “Harmonicare” after hearing that her friend’s mother, who suffered from emphysema, had improved considerably after taking up the instrument. Playing music together also nurtures a sense of community among the patients.

“A lot of the benefit is social,” Ms. Shnorhokian said.
Chloe has primary ciliary dyskinesia, a rare genetic disorder that leaves her frequently short of breath and prone to serious lung infections. Playing the harmonica over the past year, along with her other medical treatments and regular swimming, has helped improve Chloe’s lung function and reduced her hospital stays, said her mother, Leslie Mota.

“I’ve seen the difference,” Ms. Mota said. “She’ll carry this thing everywhere and it drives me crazy. At home, in the car, she’s playing it all the time.”

At one class late last year, 13 attendees worked through a set list that included “Piano Man,” “You are My Sunshine,” “When the Saints Go Marching In” and the late Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah.” The program’s volunteer instructor, Jeff Bernstein, said the harmonica is ideal for amateur musicians with lung conditions because it is portable, easy to learn and, unlike other wind instruments, makes sound when the player both inhales and exhales.

COPD, which encompasses emphysema, chronic bronchitis and serious asthma, affects 6.4% of Americans and was the third-leading cause of death in the U.S. in 2014, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Smokers are at a higher risk of developing COPD, but it also can be caused by air pollutants, respiratory infections and genetic conditions.

Stephanie Williams, director of community programs for the national nonprofit COPD Foundation, said the harmonica’s long-term benefits aren’t yet clear, but the instrument is becoming an increasingly popular extension of pulmonary rehabilitation.

“It’s not as widespread and common-knowledge as I’d like for it to be, but it’s definitely getting there,” she said.

Weekly group lessons and five to 10 minutes of daily practice can help chronic lung patients strengthen their diaphragm muscles and improve stamina, Ms. Williams said. COPD causes air pockets to become trapped in the lungs, and playing the harmonica
helps patients develop the pursed-lip breathing technique used to fully exhale.

“Using that particular instrument seems ideal,” she said.

Teaneck resident Iris Charms, who has had COPD for 10 years, said she breathes easier while climbing the stairs after just five Harmonicare classes.

“I’m learning songs that I know and I practice a lot at home with my 2½ year-old grandson,” said Ms. Charms, 83. “It gives you more confidence in yourself. Generally it makes you feel stronger.”

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