APPOINTMENT REMINDERS: AN EFFECTIVE SOLUTION TO PROMOTE APPOINTMENT ADHERENCE
Missed appointments result in a lose-lose situation for both provider and patient. A no-show patient means more time rescheduling and longer wait times for other patients who are interested in an appointment, resulting in lower patient satisfaction. It also means higher costs of care delivery, while personnel and equipment go underutilized. Most importantly, missed appointments also negatively affect the health and treatment outcomes of the patient and increase the likelihood of complications and hospital admissions.

While patient-attendance data varies, studies generally report non-attendance rates between 15% and 30% in outpatient clinics. Simply reducing the number of missed appointments through appointment reminders is a low-cost fix that will increase the overall efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of health care.

**Appointment Reminder Solutions**

The main reason for missing an appointment is uncomplicated: the patient forgot that they were scheduled. Other significant reasons for missed appointments include lack of understanding of the health care system, fear of hearing bad news or seeing a doctor, transportation and child care conflicts, and not feeling well enough to make the visit.

There is overwhelming evidence that appointment reminders are an effective solution for improving appointment attendance across patient populations and in a wide variety of health care settings. A reminder system may also increase cancellation or rescheduling of appointments when a patient has a conflict, meaning the provider will know ahead of time about an opening for an appointment with another patient, which gives other patients the opportunity to be seen sooner.

But what makes an appointment reminder the most effective? In an April 2016 article for *Journal of Patient Preference and Adherence*, researchers determined that even simple reminders of date, time, and place caused a significant increase in appointment attendance. Reminders with further information, such as a health promotional message or information about an upcoming procedure were even more effective. Appointment reminders can be sent via text message, email, letters, and automated or manual phone call.
Phone reminders have been shown to significantly reduce no-shows and promote rescheduling. This doesn’t mean a phone call alone is most effective, however. Text message reminders are reported to have successful contact rates of over 90%. In another study, researchers found that patients who received a letter one month before their annual eye appointment along with a personal phone call 10 days beforehand were more likely to attend their appointment compared to those who received the letter alone.

**MAKING THE MOST OF APPOINTMENT REMINDERS**

When taking the step of implementing an appointment reminder system, it is important to know how to ensure it is as effective as possible. While 64% of U.S. adults now own a smartphone and are more contactable than ever, there are several factors providers should pay attention to so that their appointment reminders to patients work:

**Accurate patient contact information:** Verifying a patient’s contact information at each appointment ensures that the provider has accurate phone numbers and email addresses on hand. Out-of-date information means the patient does not receive the reminder, increasing the likelihood for non-attendance.

**Reminder receipt:** While cancelling and rescheduling is increased through phone calls, part of the challenge is reaching patients via phone, even when the contact information is correct. Telephone contact rates range between 30% to 60% for most providers. This is because patients may be at work during hours that providers are trying to reach them, or that some patients prefer to not answer calls from numbers they do not recognize. Text message reminders on the other hand, have extremely high successful contact rates. However, with regard to text message reminders, it is important to consider patient age. The number of older adults with mobile phones is increasing annually, but not all may know how to use text messaging and may prefer other methods of contact.
Comprehension: Patient comprehension of reminders, regardless of format, is dependent on several factors including literacy level, cognitive ability, and language. These are all significant considerations for providers who often serve diverse populations. It may be helpful to ask patients if they are comfortable receiving messages via text or over the phone and if they have language preferences or barriers.

Timing: Evidence shows that appointment reminders are effective between 1 and 4 days prior to the scheduled appointment. However, if the only reminder is day-of or day before, the patient may not have time to reschedule if necessary.

Rescheduling: If a patient receives a text message reminder and realizes they need to reschedule, how easy would it be for them to call in to do so? Would they be met with an automated message and several unclear options, or would someone answer their call right away? Listing a direct call-back number in the text message can be helpful as well as incorporating a call-receiving system that is simple and direct for appointment rescheduling.

Tailoring to high-risk groups: While appointment reminders tend to be effective across age groups, some evidence shows that tailoring reminders to higher-risk groups like minorities, those with comorbidities, and substance abusers is necessary.
Appointment reminders are a proven and cost-effective method for promoting appointment adherence. To make reminders most effective, it is important to keep the patient in mind and tailor outreach accordingly. Increased appointment adherence due to reminders will lead to greater patient satisfaction, improved health outcomes for the patient, less stress for appointment management staff, and overall better patient-provider relationships.

WANT TO EXPLORE APPOINTMENT REMINDER TOOLS WITH YOUR ORGANIZATION?

PhoneTree offers communication technology that healthcare providers can use to communicate with patients via phone, text and email. Our phone, text and email technology can be used to construct patient communication flows that support patient appointment compliance, thereby reducing no-shows and no-goes.

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At PhoneTree®, we’re in the business of helping people. We use our top-of-the-line messaging solutions to inspire your patients to do the things you need them to do. With automated phone call, text messaging and email software, you can help motivate people to act while empowering them with information. With over 25 years in business, nobody understands better than PhoneTree the power of well-crafted patient communication.
SOURCES


