INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING PATIENT ADHERENCE
While a missed doctor’s appointment may seem minor, such examples of low patient adherence to health care lead to negative health outcomes and increased health care costs. Missed appointments mean opportunities for disease detection and needed care are delayed, and providers take a financial hit. However, patient adherence isn’t measured only by appointment attendance rates. It also encompasses compliance with other medical advice or follow-up measures as well.

Patient adherence is integral to positive health outcomes overall. Strong patient adherence to medical follow-up:

- Positively affects chronic disease management
- Promotes clinical research trial completion and improves trial validity
- Decreases patient appointment no-shows
- Ensures medication is taken correctly and on time
- Increases vaccination rates

Since providers strive to improve patient health outcomes and deliver high quality care, intervention strategies for promoting patient adherence should be considered. Strategies for improved patient adherence include investing in human resources for more personalized care, considering the whole patient—beyond their illness—to determine barriers to adherence like access to care or level of education, and providing copay assistance so that patients are not torn between receiving care or maintaining financial stability.

However, one intervention strategy for improving patient adherence is now at patients’ fingertips. With increased accessibility of smartphones and other communication technologies, providers can administer follow-up with patients effectively, conveniently, and at low-cost. Further, automated phone services also mean that time for phone reminders doesn’t fall on provider staff.

Simple phone reminders can resolve a main reason for missed appointments and follow-up: confusion, or forgetting the appointment date and time. If patients (or guardians of patients) give consent to providers for phone contact, text message and phone message reminders serve well to promote patient adherence to medical follow-up and appointments—even in resource limited settings.
SMS/Text message Reminders

Text message reminders effectively reach a wide variety of patients in multiple age groups, income levels, and other demographics. For example, in a randomized controlled trial to test the effectiveness of text message reminders in increasing appointment adherence at a pediatric clinic serving primarily African American low-income families, it was determined that “more than 95% of families at the clinic have cell phones, 75% of families use text messaging daily, and 85% have unlimited text messages, suggesting that a text message reminder system would be feasible” for the patient population.

The study authors concluded through their results that “sending text message reminders is an effective means to improve appointment adherence at a pediatric resident clinic in an urban setting.” Other studies also demonstrate the effectiveness of text messages in reaching various populations to promote patient adherence:

- Text message reminders were shown to improve rates of second dosages of the flu vaccine in an urban clinic that served Latino patients aged 6 months to 8 years old living in a low-income area.
- Text message reminders were shown to improve Depo-Provera injection adherence in urban adolescents.
- Over half of participants receiving weekly text message reminders achieved 90% adherence to antiretroviral treatment in a study in rural Kenya.

Text messages make it easy for patients to follow-up with questions. Provider contact information, such as office phone number, can be included to simplify the call-back process if patients have questions regarding their follow up reminder or need to reschedule an appointment.

Some settings are less effective, or not appropriate, for text message reminders.

One study showed text message reminders were not effective in a youth clinic of a University Hospital. Researchers concluded this was partly because “most patients are referred by a professional or by their parents and do not initiate appointments themselves.”

In another study at a psychology clinic, text message reminders one day before scheduled appointments were shown to have no significant impact on improving appointment adherence. In fact, researchers reported “more client dropouts in the SMS compared to the no SMS condition.” Researchers concluded that “there is more to client non-attendance in psychological settings than the simple forgetting of appointments.”

Of note: As with all patient reminders, patient information should be protected. Text message reminders need not include a patient’s name or other identifiers, and providers should ensure that all delivered messages are HIPAA compliant.
Telephone/Phone Call Reminders

Phone call reminders are also effective in promoting patient adherence, especially when used in combination with text message reminders. In the pediatric clinic appointment adherence trial, study authors acknowledged that “while 32% preferred only a phone call reminder and 20% preferred just a text message reminder, 45% preferred both a text message and a phone call reminder.” And study results showed “the no-show rate was significantly lower in those who received text reminders with the standard phone message compared to those who only received phone message reminders (23.5% versus 38.1%).”

Although it is certainly important to consider care setting and patient access to mobile phones, several studies across health care settings show that a combination of text message and phone reminders within 3 days of appointment or necessary follow-up does improve patient adherence. This makes phone reminders a simple and cost-effective option to improve delivery of services, ensure appropriate follow-up, and increase patient health benefits.

How PhoneTree Can Help

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.

Because the technology is not encrypted, it cannot be used to send ePHI (electronic protected health information). However, it can be used to send non-ePHI - including links to patient portals (where patients can then securely access their ePHI). It is also used to send appointment reminders and pre-appointment instructions, among other things – essentially any communication that does not require the disclosure of ePHI.

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


