NO-SHOWS NO MORE

WHY MISSED APPOINTMENTS ARE WINNING AND
HOW YOU CAN FIGHT BACK
As a dedicated healthcare professional, your goal is to deliver quality care to each patient who makes an appointment, a task made all the more difficult when they don’t actually walk through your doors.

Cancelled appointments, or “no-shows,” are unfortunately common in the medical profession. No-show rates have been shown to range from 15-30 percent in general medicine clinics and urban community centers, and as high as 50 percent in primary care facilities.¹

No matter how dedicated and organized your practice may be, it’s impossible to guarantee that every patient who makes an appointment will keep it.

No-shows can cause a ripple effect throughout your practice: You’re unable to provide the treatment the patient needs, valuable staff time is wasted preparing needlessly, it can affect the quality of care delivered to other patients and it strikes a serious blow to your bottom line.

THE RATE OF NO-SHOWS

BioMed Central (BMC) Health Services conducted a 12-year study of no-show rates at 10 regional/community hospitals in Houston, including primary care and various subspecialty settings (gastrointestinal, audiology, urology, etc.). The goal was to evaluate the prevalence, predictors and economic consequences of patient no-shows.

PATIENT NO-SHOWS: FOUR AREAS OF IMPACT

- Interruptions in patient care
- Wasted staff prep time
- Underutilized opportunities for other patients
- Missed appointment revenue
In the 10 hospitals studied, the mean no-show rate was 18.8 percent, with gastrointestinal (25.7 percent) and audiology (12.6 percent) experiencing the highest and lowest no-show rates, respectively. Primary care had the greatest number of visits per year (averaging 185,945) and consequently the most total no-show patients per year (an average of 33,098).

Other studies have placed the no-show rate at 10-30 percent for inner-city clinics, community health centers and university medical centers, 2%-15% for private practices and over 20 percent at the national level. An investigation of large scale no-show patterns within the Veterans Health Administration found men had a higher no-show rate than females (to age 65) and new patients fail to keep appointments at higher rates than established patients.

**NO-SHOWS AND PATIENT HEALTH**

Patients who fail to show not only impact their own care, but that of patients who keep their appointment. BMC Health Services Research provided evidence that, among diabetic patients with a prior hospital admission, those who did not show for an appointment were at 60 percent greater risk for subsequent hospital admission than those who attended and had poorer glycemic control.

"Patients who no-show to primary care appointments interrupt clinicians’ efforts to provide continuity of care,” the report stated.
At the Evans Army Hospital in Fort Carson, Colorado, no-shows have a profound impact on the care administered to others. “If we can’t rebook it, access across the board decreases,” said Maj. Jason Anderson, chief administrator of the hospital. “If the next patient is early, the provider can see them. But this doesn’t normally happen. A habitual no-show can take up to five slots with rebooking their appointments. This is denying several of our patients the opportunity to receive the care they need.”

**NO-SHOWS AND REVENUE**

No-show patients have a major impact on revenue. In the BMC study, the estimated marginal cost of no-shows for the 10 clinics in 2008 was $14.58 million (including labor, lab rescheduling, paperwork, etc.) In 2005, the estimated cost reached a high of $16.65 million. The Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson hospital, meanwhile, saw 13,244 no shows in FY2015, for an estimated cost of approximately $2 million.

Overall, group clinics (which account for 47 percent of the approximately 230,000 physician practices in the U.S.) risk losing more than $100 billion annually as a result of patient no-shows.

A 2013 study on “Estimating the Cost of No-shows and Evaluating the Effects of Mitigation Strategies” at an endoscopy suite found that no-shows increase the cost of each procedure performed and can significantly decrease the expected net gain of outpatient procedure centers.
“(T)he financial loss attributed to no-shows can be very high based on reported no-show rates for the practice we studied and those in the literature and can significantly decrease the expected net gain of outpatient procedure centers. No-show interventions reduce the no-show rate; but can be costly, challenging to implement, and do not resolve the problem entirely.”\textsuperscript{10}

**REASONS FOR NO-SHOWS**

The reasons for patient no-shows vary, but a study by the Annals of Family Medicine estimate that 42 percent of patients skip their appointments because of:

- Overscheduling/forgetting about their appointment.
- Feeling their condition has worsened and opting to go to the emergency room instead.
- Not understanding why their appointment is necessary.
- A limited relationship with their physician making them less concerned about skipping an appointment.
- A language barrier that causes them to misunderstand when their appointment is scheduled.
- Socio-economic factors.
- Worries about receiving bad news and hoping to avoid the situation.\textsuperscript{11}

The report also notes that some patients may simply feel better and not need the appointment, but fail to notify the office.
WHAT FACILITIES WITH HIGH NO-SHOWS HAVE IN COMMON

A Lack of Pre-Appointment Communication

Effective communication prior to the visit - whether it’s gathering vital information, arranging for pre-visit lab tests or scheduling follow-up appointments - establishes a clear patient-physician rapport that reinforces the importance of keeping the appointment.

A report in the Annals of Family Medicine found that 41 percent of no-show patients interviewed did not fully understand the ramifications of not keeping their appointment, as many believed their no-show actually resulted in a positive outcome for the clinic. When asked what effect her no-show may have on the clinic, one patient stated, “I don’t know. I guess they get free time.” Another said, “You know what, I don’t know. I know that if it’s a crowded day, they’re probably very happy.”

12 OF PATIENTS SAY THEY DON’T FULLY UNDERSTAND THE RAMIFICATIONS OF THEIR MISSED APPOINTMENT.

An “Acceptable” Level of No-Shows

The frequency of no-shows has led some hospitals to accept them as a regular part of their practice. Rather than take steps to reduce the number of no-shows, some practices instead factor them into the equation and attempt to compensate with creative solutions such as overbooking. While it may improve overall patient access and productivity, it can also increase patient wait and overtime costs.

A study by two Purdue University management professors found that overbooking to compensate for no-shows could, in many instances, have a negative effect in the form of longer wait times for other patients.
“In airlines when you overbook, you bump customers, and they are the ones who pay the price for overbooking. The rest of the plane goes fine,” said Suresh Chand, Ph.D., who conducted the study along with Herbert Moskowitz, Ph.D. “The problem in healthcare is if you overbook, it will cause delays for other patients and that needs to be considered.” In addition, a study by University of Colorado researchers found that small, private practices that overbook to limit wait times as compensation for no-shows face more risks than benefits compared to larger, busier practices.

A study in The Ochsner Journal found patients who report good communication with their doctor are more likely to be satisfied with their care, to follow advice and adhere to their prescribed treatment. They are more likely to agree with the doctor about the need for follow-up treatment.\textsuperscript{15}

“Saying, ‘We really need you to come back. Is this something you can make work?’ makes a big difference,” said Melissa Stratman, CEO of Coleman Associates, a consulting firm in Boulder, Colorado. “When patients see you as their advocate, they respond. Your big picture strategy needs to really show patients that you care.”\textsuperscript{16}

**Failure to Stress the Importance of Appointments to Long-Term Care**

Patients who don’t feel a connection with their doctor, who are new or visit several doctors in the same practice are all less likely to view a missed appointment as significant to their long-term healthcare.

**STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING NO-SHOWS**

Reducing the number of no-shows is a major focus in the healthcare industry, and improving patient engagement is an essential part of the strategy.
Many practices are recognizing that the processes and procedures that may have worked in the past are ineffective today. Utilizing new technologies may help them better communicate and connect with patients.

Stay Connected

The most common reason patients give for a missed doctor’s appointment - 35.5 percent in one study\(^\text{17}\) - is simply “I forgot,” but new technologies can play a major role in greatly reducing that number. Communication by email, text, voice, or even social media has been shown to be effective in reducing no-shows, and can be tailored toward the patient’s or patient groups’ preferred method of communication.

It’s more than just picking up a fancy new method of communication; utilizing technology to remind patients of appointments actually works. A study by the Robert Wood Johnson University Medical Group
found that 23.1 percent of patients who received no reminder missed their appointments. The number of no-shows fell to 17.3 percent when patients were sent an automated appointment reminder.18

Another study showed that the no-show rate among patients who received email reminders decreased by 35 percent.19

Reminders can be combined with what is being termed “automated empathy,” emails that check on a patient’s well-being and can be linked to upcoming appointments or procedures.

“There’s a limited number of resources in healthcare,” said Cara Waller, CEO of the Newport Orthopedic Institute in Newport Beach. “If you do 500 joint replacements in a year, how do you follow up with all of those patients every day? (This) allows you to direct your energy to people who need the handholding.”20

Confirmation or Cancellation Messages
Encouraging patients to either confirm or cancel their appointment within a specific timeframe gives them

ENCOURAGING A PATIENT TO CONFIRM OR CANCEL INCREASES THE LIKELIHOOD THAT THEY WILL FOLLOW THROUGH WITH THEIR VISIT.

the opportunity to reschedule their appointment if the current time is no longer convenient. It also lets healthcare facilities adjust their schedule
to avoid unnecessary downtime. Reminders to confirm or cancel can be sent 24 to 48 hours before the appointment. Patients can even add the appointment to their personal online calendar.

In addition, encouraging a patient to confirm or cancel their appointment lets them become actively involved in the healthcare process and increases the likelihood that they will follow through with their visit. Personal or automated phone calls, texting and scheduled emails (whichever their preferred channel may be) can all be used to send a friendly reminder.

Kaiser Permanente, the nation’s largest nonprofit healthcare provider, tested an automated text messaging program at one of its clinics with the goal of reducing appointment no-shows. The experimental program resulted in 1,873 fewer missed appointments at a savings of $150 per patient, leading to a total cost savings of $275,000. The program has since been rolled out nationally.\textsuperscript{21,22}

Automate Wait Lists

Many offices are utilizing “wait lists” to fill vacancies in their appointment schedule due to no-shows - and, once again, technology is making the process better. Special messaging apps and programs can immediately alert patients on the waitlist of a vacancy via text or email, rather than requiring a staff member to call each individual patient to determine their availability. The feature improves patient access to care and their relationship with...
the physician, as well as lets the clinic reduce revenue loss due to a no-show.

In the UK, a survey by the National Health Service found that 91 percent of patients would accept a last-minute appointment due to a cancellation if offered the slot.²³

**Conclusion**

Effective and timely communication utilizing available technology can be an important tool in reducing the number of no-show patients. By automating tasks such as sending appointment reminders or confirmation/cancellation emails and filling last-minute vacancy alerts - as well as other notifications to engage patients - healthcare facilities can drastically cut revenue loss as well as reduce their staff’s workload, letting them focus on delivering the best care possible.
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