

## Getting Timely Appointments, Care, and Information

### *Essential Behaviors to Improve the Patient Experience*

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#### Q. When you made this appointment for care you needed right away, did you get this appointment as soon as you thought you needed?

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- **Remain positive when responding to the patient.** If you are unable to accommodate their request, immediately offer an alternative.
- **Maintain an empathic tone when speaking.** Let patients and families know that you have heard their request and you will do all you can to aid them.
- **Acknowledge that the patient's need is urgent,** regardless of your personal feelings. Diminishing their perceived need will only upset the patient. Anxiety is a form of suffering. The patient is likely experiencing anxiety if he or she feels the appointment need is urgent. By acknowledging this, you are helping to reduce their anxiety and mitigate suffering.
- **Offer options whenever possible.** Patients feel empowered by choice and autonomy, even if it is not their first preference.
- **Set patient expectations for walk-in appointments** such as reminding patients that there may be a longer wait, but that the provider and staff will take the time to care for them.
- **Train staff to convey empathy and understanding of each patient's situation.** Showing empathy may be more effective in addressing the patient's need than an immediate appointment.

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#### Q. When you made this appointment for a check-up or routine care, did you get this appointment as soon as you thought you needed?

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- **Maintain a positive attitude when corresponding with patients.** Scheduling can be a frustrating process. Use phrases that include the word "we" to indicate you will collaboratively accomplish a task: "We will get this figured out," or "We will find a time that works for you."
- **Set a policy of always providing patients with a choice** when the ideal appointment time is not available
- **Do not promise patients what you cannot consistently deliver.** For example, if it is highly unlikely you will be able to work a patient into the morning schedule, do not have them call in the morning to check availability. Do not set up your team to fail at meeting patient expectations.

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#### Q. In the last 3 months, when you phoned this provider's office during regular office hours, how often did you get an answer to your medical question that same day?

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- **Greet the patient by name after they share it.**
- Introduce yourself and state what you will do.
- **Use "please" when making requests** and "thank you" when requests are completed.
- **Be present, listen to the patient and show concern.**
- **Always reference the voice mail or message you are responding to** when answering medical questions.
- **Apologize to patients who have experienced a delay in receiving their response.**
- If you need to seek further information or instruction, communicate clearly to the patient when they can expect a return call.

- **Maintain a calm pace and tone of voice, even if the practice is busy.** Patients need to feel they are valued individually and that their calls are as important as everything else that may be occurring there.
- **Thank the patient for calling** and express your desire to meet their needs.

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**Q. In the last 3 months, when you phoned this provider’s office after regular office hours, how often did you get an answer to your medical question as soon as you needed?**

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- All answering service team members and recorded **messages should thank the caller for calling.**
- **Reduce patient anxiety by using a warm voice and a kind language.** First impressions are very important. Kindness and consideration shown for a patient may influence the patient’s overall perception of the practice.
  - Greet the patient by name after he or she shares it.
  - Introduce yourself and state what you will do.
  - Use “please” when making requests and “thank you” when requests are completed.
  - Be present, listen to the patient and show concern.
- **Make sure all answering service team members know how to pronounce each doctor’s name** correctly. This makes the service seem more connected to the care team.

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**Q. Wait time includes time spent in the waiting room and exam room. During this visit, did you see this provider within 15 minutes of your appointment time?**

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- **Exaggerate the expected wait time to better manage patients’ expectations.** If their wait time is likely to be 10 minutes, give patients an estimate of 20 minutes. That way, if there are any unforeseen delays, it has already been worked into the wait, and you will be better able to exceed the patients’ expectations. Do so within reason, though, or patients will learn to scale back your estimated wait times.
- **Apologize and offer reasonable explanations if patients are experiencing a delay** in seeing the physician. For example, “I’m sorry Mr. Jefferson, but Dr. Stevens will be approximately 20 minutes late due to an emergency. We hope this is not too much of an inconvenience for you.”
- **If there is a significant delay (15 to 30 minutes or more), give patients the option of either waiting for the physician or rescheduling their appointment.** Patients will almost invariably stay and wait, but they will feel far better about the encounter because they were offered a level of autonomy that afforded them some control over the experience.
- **Refer to the waiting room as the “reception area.”** The term “waiting room” only reinforces that the patient is waiting.
- **Thank the patient for waiting.**
- **Demonstrate that you value the patient’s time as much as the physician’s.** Do *not* treat delays as “business as usual.”
- **Pay special attention to delays if patients are charged or otherwise “punished” for arriving late** to an appointment. Patients will be extremely dissatisfied with a perceived double standard.