Strategies for Reducing No-Shows

Reduce Delays

The longer patients wait, the higher the no-show rate. Reducing the delay will reduce the no-shows.

Provide Reminders

Sending reminders by mail or using phone reminders can reduce the no-shows. In some environments, the best "contact time" is 72 hours prior to the appointment time. In others the best contact time is 24 hours in advance. If all patients can't be contacted, call or contact the patients who would have high impact if they don't show (i.e. early morning appointments or longer appointments with longer appointment lengths).

Close the Visit

How providers close the initial visit has an effect on future no-shows. If patients know why they are being asked to return (the purpose of the visit), they are more likely to show up. Patients will return if they see the value in returning and if the appointment is made with patient input for a time that meets their needs.

Make Cancellations Easy

When it is difficult to cancel an appointment patients will cancel by not showing up. Cancellations can be made earlier by such strategies as a 24-hour cancellation telephone line.

Use Scripts

A restaurant in Boston used a script with customers to reduce the no-shows for dinner reservations. The script said "If you can't keep this reservation, you will call us at…won't you?" This reduced no-shows by 50%

Have a Frank Discussion

When patients repeatedly no-show, an effective strategy includes identification of these patients, and a frank discussion with them about the effect of the no-shows. Some patients may be precluded from making any appointments.

Reduce Provider "Bump Rate"

There is a direct correlation between high bump rates (provider cancellations) and high no-shows. Reducing the provider/system cancellations will reduce the no-shows.

Track Progress

Once these strategies are employed, compare measurements of no-shows after each of the changes with the baseline no-show rate. Patients don't show either due to patient factors or system factors. We need to identify each of these and work on them.

Provider Influence on No-Shows

Provider behaviors can have a significant influence on no-show rate:

1. Providers will often, when they expect today's patient's clinical condition to improve, will have the patient make a follow-up appointment "just in case" This fills up the future schedule. The doctors do this in order to protect themselves from future daily demand. This occurs primarily in salaried environments. Alternatively, other providers, when they expect that today's patient's clinical condition will improve, will say "you don't need to make an appointment, but if you need to see me, you can call me back at any time." This behavior occurs primarily in non-salaried environments. The first behavior will result in increased no-shows. We can shift the behaviors from the first to the second, by:

   a. Reducing the waiting time so that there's always clinic space
   b. Making the panel size right so that the fear of too much demand is mitigated
   c. Moving away from a focus on visits to a focus on managing a panel, where the first behavior (above) offers no advantage.

2. Some providers "sell" the need for a future appointment by clearly identifying the clinical need for the visit and explaining in some detail what the patient can expect to happen. Those expectations often will include an activity that can only take place in person - examination of the heart and lungs, for example. Other providers do not sell the return visits, and as a consequence, the no-show rate is higher. With providers that have a strong practice team, we also see that the team reinforces the message. In practices with a weak team, the message is not reinforced.

3. Providers that offer a positive patient experience (primarily by staying on time), will also have lower no-show rates. Patients often have to make a choice about showing up with a negative experience or showing up with a positive experience.