

Using Secure Electronic Messaging to Support Patient and Family Engagement

Secure electronic messaging can play an important role in **improving patient access** to health care providers. It also helps patients who want to be **better informed and more active members of their care team**.

Secure messaging can be used to

- promote care coordination between visits
- handle routine health issues
- address patient questions and concerns
- monitor patient condition(s)
- adjust the care plan in a timely manner
- help patients better manage their condition

Secure messaging can be convenient for handling routine nonclinical tasks such as medication refills and referrals.

Evidence from a number of practices indicates that offering secure messaging contributes to patient satisfaction with care.

Patients really like secure messaging. They feel it is a more personal way to communicate with their doctor directly online rather than having a phone message go through the nurse or staff.

— Primary care physician

Stage 2 Meaningful Use Objective and Measure

Objective: Use secure electronic messaging to communicate with patients on relevant health information.

Measure: A secure message must be sent using the electronic messaging function of certified electronic health record (EHR) technology by more than 5% of unique patients seen by an eligible provider (EP) during the reporting period.

Benefits to Patients

Secure messaging provides an easy way for patients to communicate with their providers between visits. Benefits include:

- Patients can communicate with their provider in an unpressured setting that fits their schedule.
- Patients avoid the frustration of trying to reach their provider by phone. Instead, they feel they have easier access to their providers.
- Some patients feel more comfortable discussing sensitive health issues with their providers via secure messaging rather than in person.
- Patients can follow up with questions they may have forgotten or didn't have time to ask during the clinic visit. Also, they can review the provider's response whenever it is convenient.
- Patients can share important information for managing their health condition(s), such as blood pressure or blood glucose levels.

Benefits to Providers

Secure messaging can be **convenient, cost-effective, and efficient** for providers. Benefits include:

- Avoids the problem of “telephone tag,” which can result in delays in communication as well as miscommunication.
- Allows providers to address a variety of routine health issues more efficiently, freeing up time for additional office visits and increasing access for patients who need to be seen.
- Automatically captures and documents communication with patients in their EHRs, improving record accuracy.
- Staff can triage patient messages and batch answers, which improves efficiency and saves additional time if auto-replies are used for routine issues.

Common Concerns for Providers

Providers may have concerns about introducing secure messaging into their practice.

I'll be swamped with questions.

Rather than being flooded with messages, some studies find that call volume decreases when secure messaging is introduced. Providers also appreciate being able to respond to patients at their convenience.

I'm not paid to answer email.

Time spent communicating through secure messaging often replaces time spent on less efficient telephone calls.

My patients won't use secure messaging.

While not all patients will have computer access or feel comfortable using secure messaging, practices that actively promote secure messaging have had success with patient adoption. When patients understand the value of secure messaging, such as being able to reach their provider more easily, they are more likely to try it.

Rather than being inundated with messages, providers actually experience increased productivity according to a number of evaluations.

— Wakefield et al., 2010

Patients will use secure messaging inappropriately.

Studies show that in the majority of cases patients use secure messaging appropriately to address non-urgent health issues, such as questions about lab results or medications.

Does secure messaging raise new liability issues?

Liability considerations are similar to other forms of communication, such as telephone, mail, and paper records.

Encouraging Patients to Use Secure Electronic Messaging

Some tips for promoting secure messaging to patients include:

- Get everyone involved, from telephone and front desk staff to clinicians.
- Provide talking points to remind staff and providers about what to highlight with patients.
- Announce secure messaging through different channels, such as on the practice website or Facebook page, telephone on-hold message, signs and flyers in the clinic, and letters or postcards.
- Educate patients about when and how to use secure messaging as well as about the practice's procedures, such as when information will be sent via secure messaging and the response times.
- Ask early adopters of secure messaging for input on ways to improve it.
- Thank patients when they use secure messaging!

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