

# HOW DOES PATIENT SATISFACTION AFFECT YOUR MEDICAL PRACTICE?

The Rolling Stones may have hit the music nail on the head with their rousing rendition of “Satisfaction” but, when it comes to your medical practice, having patients who “can’t get no satisfaction” is a very bad thing. It can take a negative toll on the quality of healthcare you provide, and may even cause your practice to lose patients or decrease profitability.

“Satisfaction” isn’t just a good song name. For those in the medical industry, it should be a way of life. According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, U.S. National Library of Medicine:

“Patient satisfaction is an important and commonly used indicator for measuring quality in health care. Patient satisfaction affects clinical outcomes, patient retention, and medical malpractice claims. It affects the timely, efficient, and patient-centered delivery of quality health care. Patient satisfaction is thus a proxy, but a very effective indicator, to measure the success of doctors and hospitals.”

At a time when governmental regulations and insurance reimbursements are increasingly focused on the quality of care provided over the quantity of patients treated, patient satisfaction becomes an increasingly important factor. The art of keeping patients happy so they continue to come back to your practice and actively engage in improving their lifestyle should in fact be the focus of every medical practice across the country. Unfortunately, providers and office staff can often get so caught up in their everyday machinations and office tasks that the idea of worrying about the patients’ level of satisfaction can go right out the window.

You may not realize it, but patients do notice, and they take action. Even though they might not say anything to you directly, they might vote with their feet, schedule fewer appointments, or give your practice bad reviews. Even worse, they could engage in some self-defeating form of negative self-care. They might come to think they don’t need to care about what happens, since the practice doesn’t seem to care.

Fortunately, it is possible for your medical practice to take actions which can help improve levels of patient satisfaction and improve patient retention rates. This Knowledge Drop provides an overview of the meaning of patient satisfaction, outlines ways in which medical practices can seek to improve the patient experience, and discusses the positive effects of improving levels of happiness. It also covers the Net Promoter Score, or NPS, which can serve as a metric for assessing patient loyalty. Medical practices which are able to “try and to try” to reassess their commitment to satisfaction may just find that they have a happier staff and higher practice profitability, in addition to increased patient satisfaction.



# WHAT IS PATIENT SATISFACTION?

As the healthcare industry continues the shift towards patient-centered care delivery models, providers will need to familiarize themselves with satisfaction measures and learn how they affect their practices. In the broadest sense, patient satisfaction means that patients are happy with the level of healthcare they receive, and their perception of the way in which their healthcare providers interact with them. While that might seem like an obvious statement, there are so many individual touchpoints which can go into the creation of a satisfied patient. Of course, the highest level of satisfaction comes from the fact that the patient's medical condition is diagnosed and treated properly. But other key components of "satisfaction" include:

## Level of Friendliness

Many patients are concerned about their medical condition when they visit a doctor's office, and want to communicate with a staff that seems helpful and caring.

## Waiting Time

Many patients would be willing to switch medical practices, if it simply meant shorter wait times. How long does the patient have to wait on the telephone to get an answer, or in the waiting room to be seen for an appointment? Is there a way for prescription refills to be ordered more efficiently?

## Appointment Reminders

Does the practice provide reminders in addition to appointment cards? Are there text messages and email reminders that an appointment is forthcoming?

## Provider Engagement

Although patients understand medical providers are very busy, they do not like to have that fact displayed during their appointment. Most have only ten to fifteen minutes with the provider to get over their initial discomfort, describe their symptoms, have an examination, receive a possible diagnosis, and understand any prescribed treatments. This can all be very confusing, and quickly becomes irritating if the provider is distracted and not totally focused on the exchange at hand.

## Patient Portal

An active and highly-functioning patient portal can be very helpful for increasing patient satisfaction levels. Here the patient wants the ability to view their records and test results, ask questions and get responses in a secure environment, receive reminders about chronic condition management, and communicate with a provider via live chat from time to time to discuss ongoing issues.

## Consistency of Internal Communication

Many patients are frustrated with the necessity of describing their symptoms, care history, and medications over and over again within the same practice. Once the care provider makes a diagnosis and outlines a care plan, certain steps may get overlooked in the followup process, which can lead to delays in minimizing symptoms or facilitating a cure.

## Accurate Charting

Accurate charting is paramount in providing great care, but can be very inefficient if the provider does not take advantage of an easy-to-use EHR system that supports and enables the charting process. All providers in the practice should be able to access a chart and immediately see where the patient stands in the care process.

## Ease of Sharing Medical Information with Other Medical Entities

Even though electronic health records are supposed to reduce the lag time between sharing patient information among involved medical entities, this can still be a painfully slow process that requires a great deal of patient involvement. Despite the interoperability initiatives, patients are still required to pay for copying their charts or need to manually transfer information from one provider to another.

## Medical Education

Since patients are more involved in their own care, they need better sources of reliable information, but are not getting it from their primary providers. Information from the medical staff, easily understandable brochures, or online videos should be available to help them understand their condition and learn how to better alleviate its symptoms.

## Insurance Issues

The never-ending battles with insurance companies can place a financial and emotional strain on patients whose claims are not approved and paid on the first submission.

## Care Reminders

If the patient needs to have regular lab tests or blood pressure monitoring to help manage a chronic condition, does the practice provide gentle reminders of these helpful activities?

Equally as important is that patients in today's society want to feel they have a certain amount of control over their healthcare situation. They want to know that the practice has in fact moved from the doctor-centered theory of care to the patient-focused model.

## WHAT STEPS CAN YOUR PRACTICE TAKE TO IMPROVE PATIENT SATISFACTION?

### 1. Improve Communication Levels

Make sure everyone in your practice is on the same page with each other, and invest in an efficient patient portal for communicating information online.

### 2. Focus on Friendliness

In general, it helps for your practice to simply focus on being more pleasant. This reduces stress for everyone and leads to more positive interactions.

### 3. Chart More Efficiently

Use EHR systems that allow you to quickly and easily update patient information and document patient interactions.

### 4. Decrease Wait Times

Increase efficiency activities that eliminate boondoggles in your daily scheduling, and make more efficient use of filling empty slots.

### 5. Provide More Background Information and Clearer Instructions

Patients want more detailed information, so find more ways of providing it to them.

### 6. Utilize More Efficient Reminders

Reducing skipped appointments, maintaining regular check-up schedules and increasing reminders for routine healthcare keeps your practice running smoothly and keeps patients on track to better health.

### 7. Better Billing Responsiveness

Use a billing service that makes sure all claims are processed in a fast and efficient manner.

### 8. Make It Easier to Share Information

You want to be able to receive information from other providers in an easy manner, so you have all the input necessary to make a more informed medical decision.

## WHAT IS NPS AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO PATIENT SATISFACTION?

In healthcare, the Net Promoter Score, or NPS, is an index ranging from -100 to 100 that is calculated by assessing patient feedback. Instead of focusing on specific aspects of satisfaction, it is used as a proxy for gauging the patient's overall satisfaction, estimating patient loyalty to the practice, and determining their likelihood to recommend the practice to others.

After a patient interaction, the patient is asked to evaluate its effectiveness through a question such as, "On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely is it that you would recommend our practice to your friends or family?" Based on the response, patients are classified as "Detractors," "Passives," and "Promoters." To gain meaning from the results, NPS provides a percentage, based on the respondent classifications. It has a few more steps beyond simple averaging, but the final NPS score indicates how much work your practice needs to do to improve patient satisfaction. Improving NPS has been shown to directly correlate with increasing revenue.

## WHAT ARE THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF IMPROVING PATIENT SATISFACTION?

- Patients who trust medical care providers are more likely to have better treatment outcomes. When information is communicated in a clear manner, and interactions are pleasant and efficient, it simply follows that frustration levels are lower. This leads to improved clinical outcomes.
- Medicare reimbursement can be tied to patient satisfaction.
- Patients become more involved in managing their own care.
- The practice experiences a higher level of staff satisfaction and lower levels of physician stress.
- Happy patients stay with the practice and provide positive reviews and referrals.
- The practice realizes increased profitability.

So, take positive actions and get ready to "get some satisfaction" for your practice and your patients!