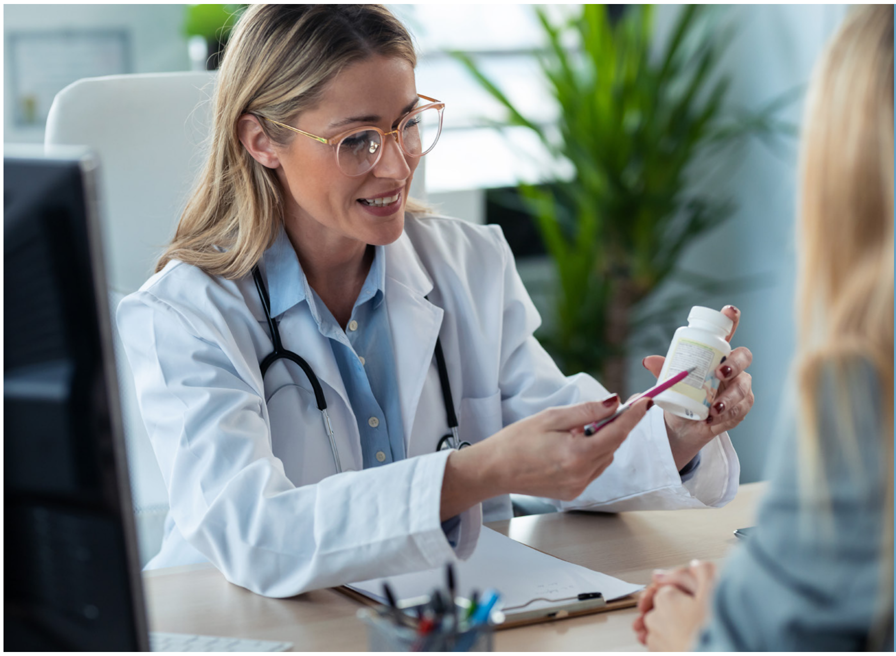
RXNT

How Providers Can Remove Barriers to Patient Compliance

The best medication and treatment plans in the world aren't effective without patient compliance. Regrettably, of the 3.8 billion prescriptions written annually in the United States, over 50% of those prescriptions are taken incorrectly or not at all.

From chronic conditions to mental illnesses, compliance is a critical factor in patient outcomes. Patients who do not fully follow treatment plans risk worsening symptoms, reduced quality of life, and greater economic burdens. In fact, a lack of medication adherence is one of the main reasons why patients do not achieve expected clinical outcomes from their treatment. It is also associated with as much as 40% of nursing home admissions and accounts for as much as 69% of drug-related adverse events resulting in hospital admissions.



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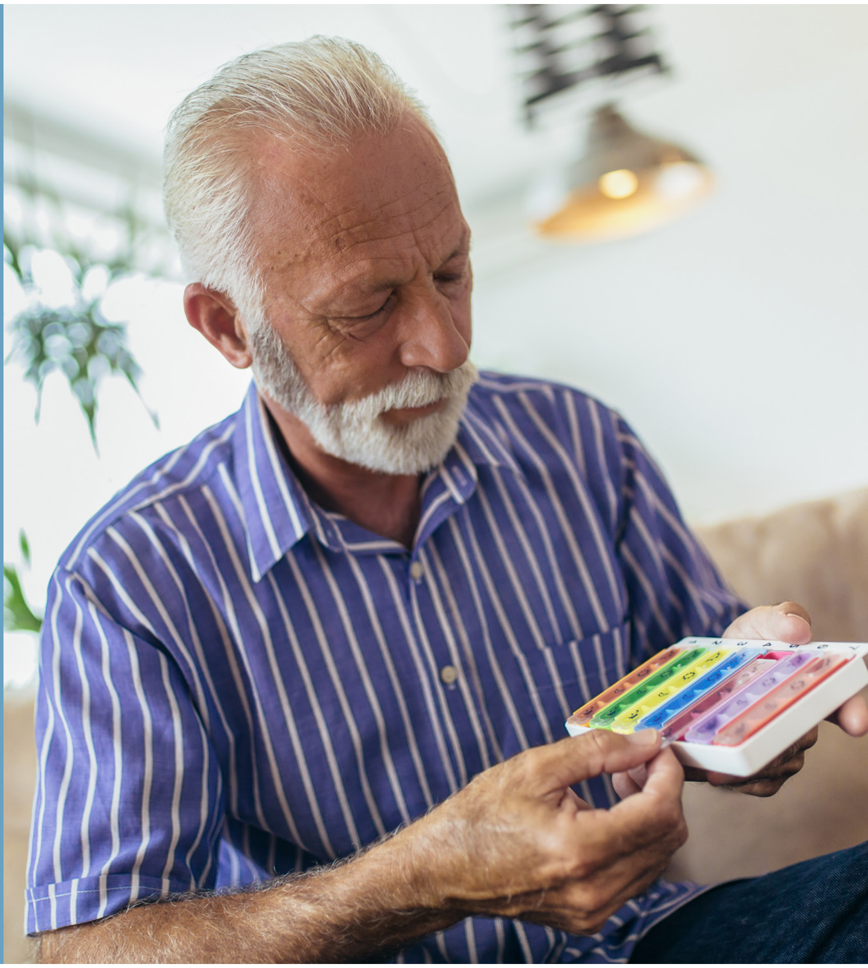
To improve patient follow through, healthcare providers can leverage communication, empathy, collaboration, and educational materials. Providing patients with clear guidance about their medication and how it is to be taken—as well as the role medicine plays in their treatment plans—helps to overcome barriers to adherence.

The Current State of Patient Compliance

Nonadherence is both costly and deadly, resulting in 125,000 deaths in the United States and incurring additional expenditures of $290 billion per year. Sadly, many of the hospitalizations and deaths caused by nonadherence are avoidable. Research indicates that 50 to 60% of patients with chronic illnesses don't fully follow their medication treatment plans. Examples of treatment nonadherence are taking the wrong doses, missing doses, taking doses at the wrong time, or abandoning treatment altogether.

Management consulting company, McKinsey & Company divides medication adherence into three core categories:

1. **Persistence:** How long patients take medication before ending treatment or switching to a different drug.
2. **Compliance:** How well do patients adhere to their prescribed plans and their schedule. McKinsey deems patients compliant if they fill 80% of their doses.
3. **Adherence:** A combined measurement of persistence and compliance, providing a comprehensive measure of how well and how long patients follow their treatment plans.



Maintaining ongoing treatment is particularly important to patients with chronic, complex conditions, such as diabetes and cancer. While the majority of these patients continue with their medication and treatment plans for longer than a month, many discontinue treatments in less than a year.

The “Why” Behind Patient Behavior

So, what’s driving pervasive patient noncompliance? The most important factors related to the medications affecting patient compliance are efficacy, dosage schedule, and the delivery mechanism. Patients are more likely to avoid taking drugs they believe to be non-effective, as well as those with complex dosage requirements and delivery mechanisms.

Patients who see a team of providers and have several treatment plans for multiple conditions often struggle to accurately follow all of their dosing.

Educational and socio-economic factors can compound the difficulty of medication adherence:

- Patients who do not have family or a support network are more likely to fail to follow their treatment or medication plans.
- Negative stigma, mis-information, or fears surrounding medications can also drive patients to drop treatment plans entirely.
- Patients who lack personal transportation or rely on public transportation to see providers and fill prescriptions are less likely to follow treatment.

There are also physician-related drivers underpinning patient compliance or a lack thereof:

- Complex medication regimes that are outside of the patient’s grasp.
- Failing to understand the patient’s medical history, financial status, and culture.
- Disjointed healthcare systems and a lack of care coordination amongst providers.
- Inadequate time spent with patients.

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The Financial Side of Nonadherence

Of course, it would be negligent to discuss patient compliance without mentioning healthcare costs and insurance coverage. In particular, chronic conditions are some of the most costly to manage, both for patients and the national healthcare system. The cost of medication is one of the biggest drivers of patient noncompliance, with 30% failing to fill a new prescription—something that occurs even for patients with commercial insurance.

According to a Truven Health Analytics-NPR Health Poll, 94% of patients with annual incomes under $25,000 do not fill or pick up prescriptions due to cost. Price is also the reason over 12% have stopped taking a medication before their provider recommended ending treatment. Only 16% use rebates and coupons to lower the price of medications. In contrast, 36% of people with annual incomes over $100,000 have used manufacturer rebates and other coupons to reduce the cost of prescription medications.

Unfortunately, many patients do not know the cost of their medication before filling prescriptions. And those who do research prescription drug prices tend to be younger and more affluent. The Truven poll showed that 64% of people in the Millennial generation searched for drug costs before filling their prescription, as well as 42% of poll respondents with annual incomes over $100,000.

However, just 19% of seniors performed cost research. And only 30% of respondents with incomes under $25,000 a year and 27% with a high school education looked up prices. With unexpected costs resulting in as many as one-third of prescriptions going unfilled, greater price transparency is a significant factor in patient compliance.

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Improving Patient Buy-In

The most important element to a successful patient-provider relationship is communication. Many patients do not share that they have stopped taking medications for a variety of reasons. Patients may not realize the importance of adherence, perceive their provider as being uninterested or untrustworthy, or feel too embarrassed to share their financial concerns.

So, what's the answer to getting patients to follow through with treatment plans and share their experiences with providers? Achieving patient buy-in requires a comprehensive approach. Rather than limiting discussions around compliance to appointments, practices must build education around its importance into every touchpoint of the patient experience.

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Start With Empathy

You've probably heard before that it's much easier to encourage people by focusing on positives rather than negatives. The same is true for patient compliance. Educational materials and conversations that focus on the patient's "failure" will only breed more feelings of shame and distrust.

Before raising conversations around adherence and compliance, take stock of the patient's health literacy. According to the Health Resources & Services Administration, low health literacy is prevalent among older adults, minority populations, those with a lower socioeconomic status, and the medically underserved. These patients need extra support navigating the complexities of our healthcare system and deciphering medical language.

Be sure to use simple, colloquial terms and define any medical language. Organize the information by starting with the most important points and explaining things in different ways. You can also utilize open-ended questions to spark conversation during appointments.

Encourage discussion by showing empathy towards patients, and explain that while treatment programs can be confusing, you're there to help. While this statement may seem obvious from the providers' point of view, it's worth sharing pointedly with patients. Patients want to feel that you have a vested interest in their well-being, their lifestyle, and their priorities.

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Share Resources to Save Costs

As noted in the Truven Health Analytics-NPR Health Poll, many patients do not pursue available avenues to lower the cost of prescription medications. The patients who can benefit the most from financial savings are least likely to research costs and search for rebates before filling prescriptions. These patients may not have access to rebate and discount programs, may not be aware of their existence, understand how they work, or have the time for research.

Providers can help keep patients up-to-date on various wellness and discount programs. While the cost of the medication is dependent on insurance coverage, providers can discuss options with patients and follow up if they see a prescription has not been filled. For particularly costly medications, it's worthwhile to consider both on-formulary and off-formulary alternatives and let the patient make a more informed decision. While in some instances, "wasteful" prescriptions may be the most appropriate choice, providers can improve patient compliance by choosing higher-value, lower-cost prescriptions whenever possible.

According to the Commonwealth Fund, the healthcare industry could save $63 million annually by curbing what they deem to be "wasteful prescribing." Wasteful drugs are defined as:

- Drugs that have over-the-counter alternatives
- Brand-name or higher-priced generic drugs that have a lower cost alternative
- "Me-too drugs" that have minor, inconsequential differences from their prototypes
- Combination drugs

Practice Patient-Centered Communication

Improving patient compliance takes more than simply explaining the medication and its dosage. Show patients that you are on their side offering help, for example, “Sometimes patients struggle to keep up with their medications. Here are some patient obstacles I see with adherence, let me share a few ways to overcome them.” This statement (or one like it) builds trust and empathy without putting the patient on the defensive. It also helps to strengthen the sense of partnership and understanding for a better patient-provider relationship.

Be sure to follow up with patients regularly to keep a pulse on their progress. Your willingness to share drug samples with patients experiencing financial distress may help them get through a difficult month or two. Take stock of their preferred communication methods for better results. Ask questions like: how they feel about the treatment plan, any side effects or concerns, or any difficulties taking the medication. It’s important to consider the patient’s lifestyle and whether the treatment plan is feasible. For more complex plans, try breaking things down by slowly implementing one step at a time.

Building a relationship with your patients can make a significant difference in their compliance and in turn, their clinical outcomes. As patients come in for follow-up appointments, ask how they are feeling about the medication plan or any side effects they are experiencing, and leave room for questions. Patients may share concerns that can open up the conversation to discuss current or potential adherence issues.

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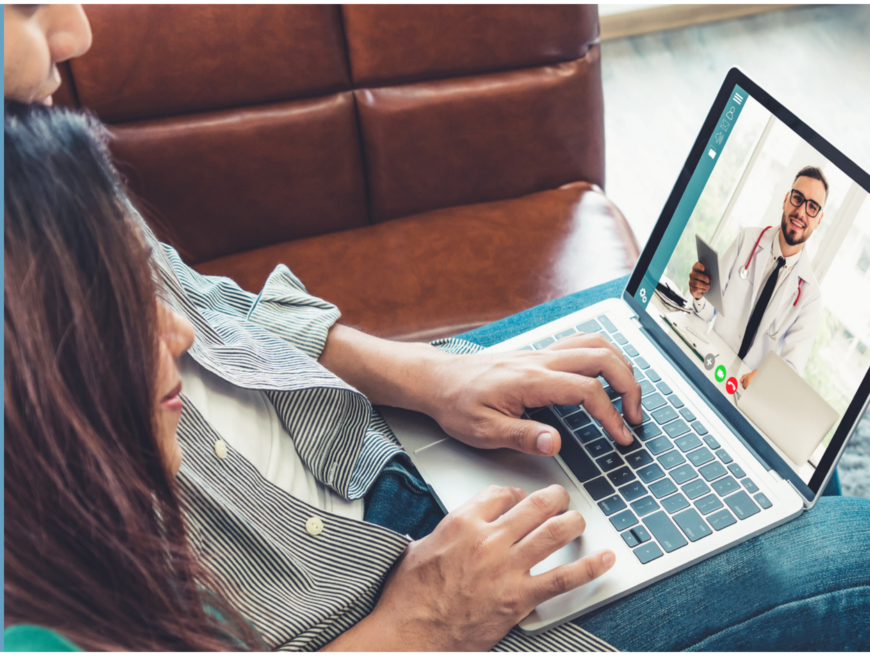

Lean on Educational Materials

Think about the educational aspect of compliance from a patient journey perspective. It may be helpful to document each step a patient takes before, during, and after a new treatment program. Each of these steps, or touchpoints, should include relevant educational material or communication to support the success of the process. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has an extensive list of educational materials for patients.

For example, before their visit, ask patients to fill out a form listing all current medications and their dosages. Then, funnel this information into the patient's electronic health record (EHR) for their provider to review before the appointment.

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During the visit, the provider can discuss potential scenarios that may occur during the treatment plan. It's important to discuss that in some instances, when patients begin to feel better, they may feel that they can discontinue treatment because they believe that the drug is no longer needed. In other scenarios, patients may stop treatment due to side effects or a lack of changes. Providers should explain that in case of side effects or concerns over the medication's efficacy, patients can reach out to them to discuss the next step.

Providing guidance and being proactive gives patients an action plan. In many instances, providers may only explain how a drug works and when to take it, leaving patients unsure what to do when they have questions. The more time a provider can spend with a patient to cover scenarios like these and the importance of adherence, the more likely it is that the patient will successfully comply. Augment discussions with printed educational materials, as well as digital resources within the patient portal.

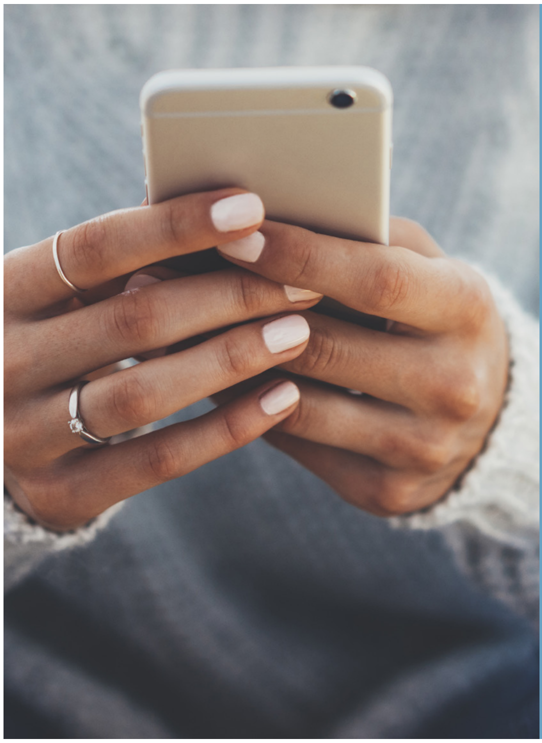
How Technology Helps Engage Patients

Before patient-centered technology, monitoring and improving patient follow-through involved manual, tedious work. Today, the convenience of software tools help practices connect and follow up with patients. Providers who encourage patients to take an active role in their treatment plans achieve greater patient compliance and adherence. Technology can help automate many of the critical steps behind patient compliance, ultimately leading to better results.

A University of Chicago Medicine pilot program helps providers better understand the potential reward of technology-based patient follow-through efforts. The program sent text messages to patients with diabetes to remind them of their medications. This simple communication led to reduced healthcare costs—lowering the cost of care by $812 per patient. It also saved each patient $1,332 in costs related to emergency department, inpatient, and outpatient visits.

Perhaps most interesting, 73% of participants reported they were satisfied with the program, and 88% said the interaction with healthcare providers played a significant role in their engagement.

Recall that many non-compliant patients lack a support system. Automated reminders—whether for upcoming appointments, missed appointments, paperwork, or medications—can help these patients keep track of their treatment plan and feel more involved in their health care.



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How Technology Helps Engage Patients

Providers should also consider recommending medication-adherence support applications to patients. Today, 81% of people in the United States own a smartphone, nearly three-quarters of adults own desktop or laptop computers, and half own a tablet. Mobile applications are available for many platforms that sync with pill containers and send reminders. Other programs will log if medications were taken, how frequently they were taken, and will automatically send reminders to refill prescriptions. Some virtual pillboxes also log symptoms and side effects.

Providers should also leverage EHR innovations to build efficiency and improve the quality of patient data. Features such as charting templates and "Smart Forms" can help providers record data quickly and accurately while tailoring encounters to unique patient needs. Improved healthcare interoperability will help create more patient-centered processes and expand the care continuum. Providers will have greater access to critical, real-time patient data for a more comprehensive understanding of their health.

The benefits of increased compliance extend to all aspects of the patient experience. A patient who understands their treatment plan and knows you're on their side will be more engaged. Patients who complete treatment programs are more likely to be satisfied with your care, and healthy patients also experience fewer relapses, symptoms, readmissions, and hospitalizations.

At RXNT, we build healthcare software to support each step of the patient journey. To learn more about solutions for patient engagement and compliance, request a free, no-hassle virtual demonstration of our cloud-based software.