What physicians need to know about patient portals

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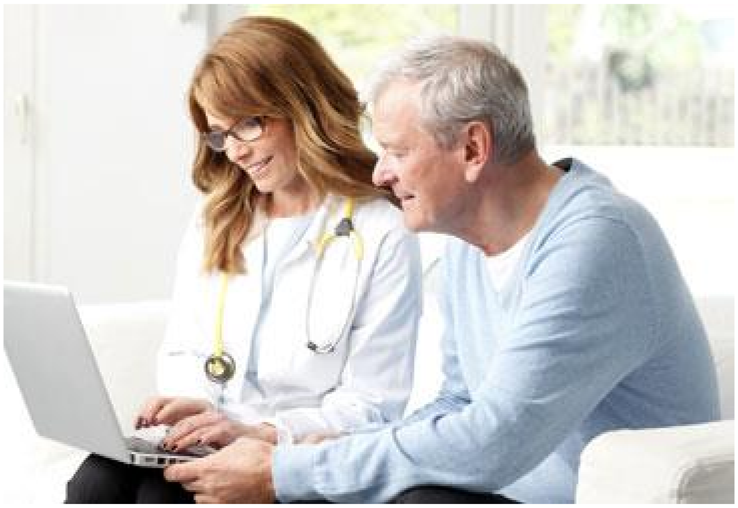
Patients are used to accessing information online immediately, from checking their bank balance to booking travel. Physicians can tap into this expectation using patient portals, which allow patients to access their health information online and also satisfy a requirement for the electronic health record (EHR) meaningful use incentive program. Learn what you need to know to get patients to use this tech feature.



Meaningful use measures

Under the current Stage 2 requirements, physicians must provide online access to at least one-half of their patients so they can view, download and electronically transmit the data to a third party. This health information must be made available to the patient within four business days after becoming available to the physician.

In addition, at least 5 percent of patients must actually use this service. In its proposed modifications to Stage 2, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services may be loosening this standard, instead requiring that only one patient has used the portal. However, the change is not final, and 5 percent remains the current standard. Meanwhile, CMS is not changing the requirement that physicians provide access to patient information online. The AMA will continue to help physicians engage their patients in their care via patient portals.

Technology requirements

In order to demonstrate meaningful use and comply with federal privacy requirements, your EHR vendor must ensure patients can access clinical data through a secure and encrypted connection. Data also must be available for download in a standardized format.

In some cases, patient portals are built into the EHR system, while other systems use separate applications. In either case, set up, configuration and management of patient passwords is required. Talk to your vendor to determine whether you need any special configuration to make your patient portal usable.

How to get patients to use the portal

You may have met the first measure—enabling patients to see their data—but now your patients must actually use the portal to access their data. Here’s how you can encourage use:

1. Train your staff on how the portal works, what data is available and how to get patients connected.
2. Post signs in your office or provide fliers promoting the patient portal and its benefits.
3. Encourage patients to view or download their health information. While the measure includes “transmitting” health data, this is still a challenge with current technology. It is often more effective for patients to download and print their data rather than using the transmit function.
4. Consider adding a computer workstation or tablet in a public area of your office. Following a patient visit, have a staff member walk the patient through setup of the portal account and demonstrate how to access data.
5. Use your current patient contact methods to encourage portal use, including the recorded hold messages on your phone, voicemail and appointment reminder communications.
6. Explain to patients during their visit what information will be available, such as lab results, current medications lists or instructions.

7. Include family members in discussions. Highlight that online access helps family members (who have appropriate permission) stay informed about what is happening with a parent, spouse or child.

Resources to help

The AMA continues to seek less restrictive meaningful use requirements and continues to advocate for changes to the program. Meanwhile, physicians can get help with meeting current requirements by using tip sheets and other resources on the AMA meaningful use Web page and patient FAQs from the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT.