



How to Minimize No-Shows

No office wants holes in their schedule.



BY LYNN HOMISAK, PRT

To Our Readers: *There are no foolish questions. Chances are that if you have a question or concern in your practice, others are experiencing a similar situation. We're here to help. PM [doctor and staff] readers are encouraged to submit questions to lynn@soshms.com which will be printed and answered in this column anonymously.*

Topic: Do You Really Care?

Dear Lynn,

Lately, we've been inundated with missed appointments and our schedule looks like a piece of Swiss cheese—holes everywhere! We send out patient reminders, so I just don't get why this is happening. Any clues?

Certainly, patient reminders work—but only if you make them count, figuratively and literally.

I recently made an appointment at my dentist and immediately received a notification via text (my preferred method of contact) reminding

me of the appointment. I marked it in my calendar.

One week prior to my appointment, I received a text reminder, giving me an opportunity to “call and reschedule if I was unable to keep it.” I double-checked my calendar.

schedule intact.” I cannot blame him for that!

Now you might think that sending three messages for one appointment is over the top, but is it? Is it better to have a 30- or 45-minute block empty? How about having two or five empty

Schedule repeat offenders during off-peak times so they are less interruptive to the schedule.

Still good. No action required.

One day prior to my appointment, I received a third text message just to say, “We are looking forward to seeing you tomorrow for your dental visit at 3:00pm.”—this time requesting, “type C to confirm”. Nice message. Subtle reminder not to miss showing up. Personally? I appreciated it and thought to myself, “Wow, my dentist really cares about keeping his

blocks? Maybe five no-shows/day is an exaggeration for your practice, but it is certainly not uncommon.

In the name of easy math, let us assume your average patient encounter equates to \$100. $\$100 \times 5$ no shows = \$500/day, \$2,500/week, or \$125,000/year. A \$100 here, a \$100 there—pretty soon we're talking about real money. These numbers

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THE CONSULTANT IS IN

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surely do add up, unfortunately not in your favor. Let's say your figures are half that, is that an okay amount

you are willing to lose? Is there any amount you are okay with losing?

We all know the many reasons why no-shows happen, ranging from unfortunate life mishaps (accidents,

illnesses, etc.) to personality patterns (laziness, irresponsibility, fear) to undesirable disconnects (dissatisfaction, appointment delays). Some we have

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FIGURE 1

(NAME OF PRACTICE)'s APPOINTMENT CANCELLATION/LATE ARRIVALS/NO SHOW POLICY

Patient acknowledgement document

Thank you for trusting your podiatric medical care to name of practice. When you schedule an appointment with us, we set aside enough time to provide you with the highest quality care. If you need to cancel or reschedule an appointment, we would appreciate the courtesy of a call to our office as soon as possible, and no later than 24 hours prior to your scheduled appointment. Failure to do so may prevent another patient from getting much needed treatment. Please refer to our Appointment Cancellation/Late Arrival and No Show Policy outlined here:

- Effective date, any established patient who fails to show or cancels/reschedules an appointment and has not contacted our office with at least a 24 hour notice will be considered a No Show and charged a (\$25.00) fee.
- Any established patient who fails to show or cancels/reschedules an appointment with no 24 hour notice a second time will be charged a (\$50.00) fee.
- If a third No Show or cancellation/reschedule with no 24 hour notice should occur the patient may be dismissed from name of practice.
- Any new patient who fails to show for their initial visit will not be rescheduled.
- The fee is charged to the patient, not the insurance company, and is the sole responsibility of the patient.
- As a courtesy, we make reminder calls for appointments. If you do not receive a reminder call or message because we are unable to contact you, the above Policy will remain in effect.
- We understand that delays can happen, however, we must try to keep the other patients and doctors on time. If you are running late, please notify the office. If a patient is 20 minutes past their appointment time, we may have to re-schedule your appointment.

We understand there may be times when an unforeseen emergency occurs including obligations for work or family that may prevent you from keeping your scheduled appointment. In the event of an actual emergency and prior notice could not be given, consideration will be given and a one-time exception may be granted.

You can reach our office 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at this number: _____.

If you call after regular business hours (*Monday through Friday, or over the weekend*), please leave a message along with a phone number where we can reach you and we will contact you promptly.

I have read and understand name of practice's Appointment Cancellation/Late Arrival/No Show Policy and agree to its terms.

Print Patient Name

X _____
Signature (Patient or Parent/Legal Guardian)

Relationship to Patient

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no control over; some we do. Some cannot be prevented.

However, we cannot sincerely convince patients that we care about them/their time and ask them to respect our schedule if they perceive that WE do not respect it or care. Which they will believe if, for example, every time they try to appoint, they are told the next available openings are a month away. To a patient in pain, it is common to accept that distant future appointment, then blow it off without notifying you because another doctor took them sooner. The result? One broken appointment. Two, if you consider



a behavioral commitment.

- 6) Appreciate that patients value their time. Try to minimize wait times once they arrive.
- 7) Initiate an effective patient re-

The most expensive thing in your office is an empty chair.

you could have offered that slot to another patient given advance notice.

If you've never calculated the rate of no-shows your practice has, a great time for that would be—now. Divide the number of no-shows by the number of patients seen. Track this percentage monthly and monitor the trajectory. Studies claim that the no-show rate can decrease by 35% when patients are notified a few days before their appointment. Based on my own experience, I find this very believable.

No office wants holes in their schedule. Let's consider several ways to prevent them.

1) Inform and educate patients of your no-show fee policy (you do have one, right?).

2) Attach value to the visit—do they understand the need to return? Are your communication skills getting that need across to them?

3) The receptionist can re-emphasize the importance of keeping this appointment when rescheduling.

4) Schedule within a reasonable amount of time.

5) Have the receptionist ask the patient to verbally repeat appointment details before leaving or getting off the phone. Repeating the words is

minder call system that allows communication with the patient through multiple channels with multiple reminders.

- Confirm the best number to reach them and their preferred contact method.

8) Schedule repeat offenders during off-peak times so they are less interruptive to the schedule.

9) Discharge patients who blatantly disregard the schedule and accumulate a set amount of no-shows per year.

10) Track reasons WHY patients are not showing (don't guess; call patient and learn their reasons).

- As with determining your no-show rate, it is only by tracking trends that you can begin implementing ways to change them.

Additional Actions to Contemplate?

1) Have shared discussions with staff. Encourage their suggestions regarding how to keep a better managed, on-time schedule.

2) Stick to scheduling patterns; patients are more likely to adhere to routine. "Mrs. Jones, since you're here on a Tues at 2:00pm, let's stick with that schedule for your next appointment

as well." If there is a need to have patients return, then getting in the schedule allows appropriate follow-up and monitoring of their progress.

3) Involve the patients. Consider monthly drawings for those who arrive on-time.

4) Make sure to document the patient's record if they do not show. Include that they were called, the reason for the no-show, whether they rescheduled, and (other than routine visits) that the doctor was informed.

5) Thank patients who keep their appointments as well as those who arrive on time.

By the way, overbooking as a way of dealing with last-minute scheduling changes is like treating symptoms instead of causes—it is not getting to the root of the problem.

The most expensive thing in your office is an empty chair, so wouldn't you consider doing things differently to minimize that? My dentist really cared. Do you?

Topic: Cancellation Change Policy

Dear Lynn,

We are implementing a cancellation charge policy. Can you give me an example of the form we can have patients sign with their paperwork acknowledging their understanding of the policy?

Included here is a template that you might find helpful (see Figure 1 on page 42). **PM**



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