Stericycle®
Communication Solutions

How to Prepare for the New Patient Journey

A Guide to
Navigating
the Reopening
of Healthcare

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The Doctor Will See You Now

Across the country, federal and state policymakers are preparing to gradually reopen the economy amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic. This includes plans to reopen non-urgent healthcare facilities and other ambulatory care services that were previously halted to free up capacity for COVID-19 patients. On April 20, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) released guidance on restarting non-emergent, non-COVID-19 healthcare in states and regions that have met specific gating criteria. This guidance is intended to help limit the spread of the Coronavirus while reopening access to care for patients who have postponed elective surgeries and procedures, chronic disease care, and preventive care.

As healthcare systems and providers navigate the reopening process, it can be difficult to know where to begin. The patient journey was already complicated. After COVID-19, it will be even more difficult to navigate as healthcare evolves and adapts to the new norm. Patient engagement has never mattered more.

HERE ARE FIVE STEPS YOU NEED TO TAKE NOW TO ENSURE YOU'RE READY TO REOPEN AND REENGAGE.
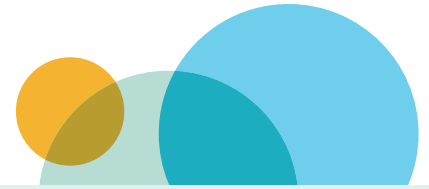
ON APRIL 16, PRESIDENT TRUMP ISSUED GUIDELINES EMPOWERING GOVERNORS TO REOPEN THEIR STATES.

The guidelines detail a three-stage process that establishes benchmarks for proceeding. The benchmarks include meeting the following milestones at either a state or regional level:

- Downward trend in symptoms over a 14-day period

- Downward trend in actual cases over a 14-day period

- Hospitals able to treat all patients and have robust testing for at-risk healthcare workers

Step 1: Prepare Your Office

Before reopening, ensure your practice's state and locality meet gating criteria for proceeding to the first stage of a phased reopening. If you do meet that criteria, consider whether you will fully open or implement a phased opening such as 50 percent capacity at first based on patient demand, staffing, and available supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE). You will also need to determine which services you will be able to perform safely in person as well as those services that you will handle via telehealth or other modalities. Additional considerations include:

SANITIZATION & STERILIZATION PROCESSES

Prior to seeing patients, implement rigorous sanitization and sterilization processes. This includes regular cleaning of all surfaces staff and patients frequently touch with EPA-registered disinfectants. Be sure to deep clean tables, chairs, door handles, pens, clipboards, and the front office counter to name a few. If your office has toys, reading materials, or other communal objects, remove them or clean them regularly. Equipment will also need to be sterilized and treatment rooms will need to follow cleaning guidelines from the CDC and WHO as well as national associations such as the ADA, AOA, and the AMA.

PHYSICAL SEPARATION

Determine how you will physically separate staff and patients to maintain recommended social distancing practices. This includes adding barriers such as plexiglass between staff and patients where possible and determining your waiting room strategy. Consider limiting the number of patients in your waiting room at one time, spacing seating to maintain at least six feet of distance, or asking patients to wait in the parking lot until they are ready to be seen. And be sure to provide patients and staff with masks, tissue, alcohol-based hand sanitizer, soap at sinks, and trash cans.
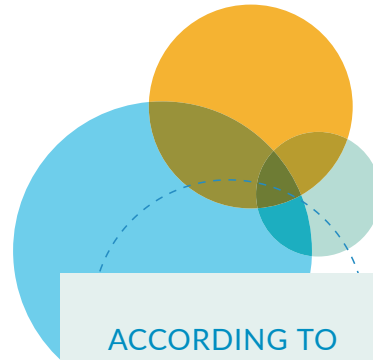
ACCORDING TO GUIDANCE FROM THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION (AMA):

Healthcare practices should consider a stepwise approach to reopening.

This strategy will allow practices to quickly identify and address any practical challenges presented before opening at full capacity. The AMA also recommends beginning with a few in-person visits a day, working on a modified schedule.

CHECK-IN AND PAYMENT PROCESSES

Consider creating a virtual patient check-in experience to securely capture patient data, including insurance information, patient history, and authorizations prior to their appointment. Your intake process should also include COVID-19 pre-screening questions to determine if patients have a fever or symptoms of COVID-19, including cough or shortness of breath, sore throat, or systemic symptoms like myalgias or chills. Posters and signs at clinic entrances should also provide instructions for patients with fever or symptoms of respiratory infection. You will also need a plan to separate sick patients with symptoms from those without symptoms by creating separate waiting areas. Finally, determine how you will accept patient payments, including payment plans, and consider implementing mobile payment options so patients and staff can avoid touching money, cards, or devices in your practice.
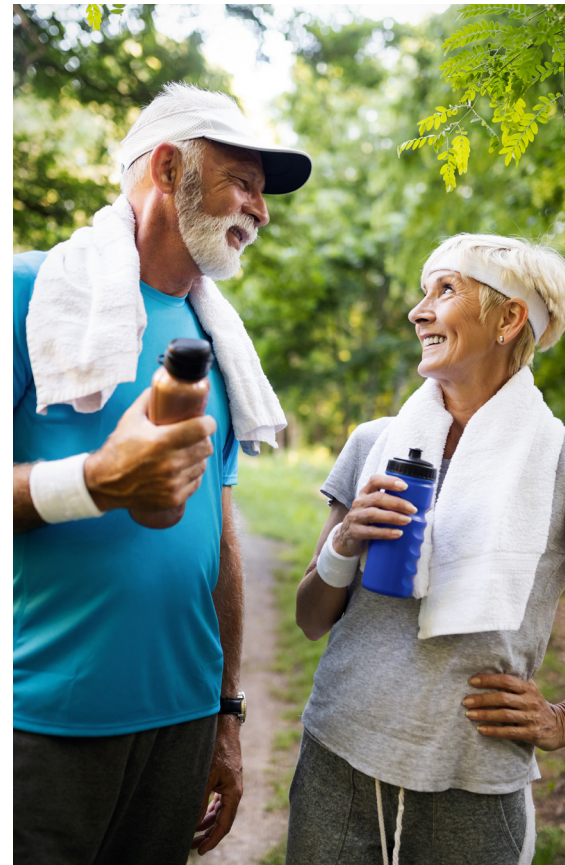
TIP:

Implementing a communication and reminders solution with two-way text messaging capabilities is a great way to communicate with patients during the check-in process. Not only is it convenient for both patients and staff, it promotes social distancing and contactless engagement.

Step 2: Prepare Your Staff

Consider your staffing needs and be prepared to make staffing adjustments, which may include bringing staff and physicians back in phases or working on alternating days or different parts of the day to reduce contact. If your practice was shut down completely, you will need to plan for a gradual reopening as patient volume may come back slowly, in cycles, or in uneven spurts. If you previously furloughed staff, you will also need to assess when and how they return based on ramp-up projections. You may also want to consider placing personnel on rotating teams or having certain positions telecommute where possible. Additionally, make sure employees know what to expect when returning to work, including social distancing guidelines, the use of masks and other PPE, and cleaning and sanitization procedures. Don't forget to educate coding and billing staff on new and updated rules under COVID-19. Additional considerations include:

EMPLOYEE SCREENINGS

Consider developing a policy to screen employees for high temperatures and other symptoms of COVID-19 before they enter the healthcare facility. Employees should also refrain from coming to work if they have a fever, have lost their sense of taste or smell, have other symptoms of COVID-19, or have recently been in direct contact with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19. Records of employee screening results should be kept in a confidential employment file, which is separate from their personnel file. All policy changes should be communicated to staff and providers before they return to work.

TIP:

Use a communication and reminders solution that includes broadcast messaging capabilities to communicate important information and weekly schedules with clinicians and staff.

PHYSICAL SEPARATION

Consider rearranging open work areas to increase the distance between your staff. Also, consider having dedicated workstations and patient rooms to minimize the number of people touching the same equipment throughout the day. Don't forget about staff areas such as break rooms and rest rooms. These areas should be cleaned and sanitized at a greater frequency than before the pandemic.

EMPLOYEE EDUCATION

Ensure staff are up to date on their continuing education credits and provide them with information and guidelines from the CDC to protect themselves and prevent the spread of pathogens and infections in healthcare settings. This includes how to properly put on and take off PPE. Employees should also receive information on how to practice good hand hygiene, which includes the use of alcohol-based hand rub and handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds when hands are visibly soiled, before eating, and after using the restroom.

> **Consider having dedicated workstations & patient rooms to minimize the number of people touching the same equipment throughout the day.**

Step 3: Prepare Your Schedule

One of the biggest impacts COVID-19 has had on the patient journey is on adherence. While adherence isn't really a new challenge, it is a problem that is being amplified during the pandemic as clinicians are unable to collect information on whether a patient is adhering to their recommended care plan. Before your practice reopens for routine care, it will be important to reach out to your high risk, chronic patients and begin to triage who you want to see first. Access will also be a challenge as patients attempt to reschedule appointments at the same time. Triaging patients into risk levels will help you effectively manage your schedule. Additional considerations include:

HOURS OF OPERATION

Based on whether you decide to fully open or implement a phased opening, you will need to determine your hours of operation. If you are only opening at 50 percent capacity, you may want to consider shortening your hours of operation. Conversely, you may need to offer extended hours of operation, including weekends to provide access to care for all of your overdue patients. You should also consider whether or not you will designate specific days or hours in the day to see higher risk patient populations. And don't forget to build in extra time between appointments. Experts recommend adding an extra five to ten minutes between appointments for additional sterilization though you may want to factor in even more time if you decide to see high risk patients on designated days.
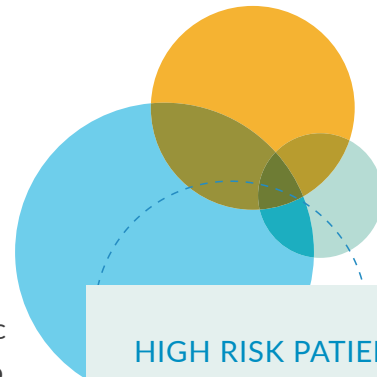
HIGH RISK PATIENTS INCLUDE THE ELDERLY, THOSE WITH MEDICAL CO-MORBIDITIES, AND POTENTIALLY OTHER PERSONS WHO ARE AT HIGHER RISK FOR COMPLICATIONS FROM RESPIRATORY DISEASES, SUCH AS PREGNANT WOMEN.

APPOINTMENT TYPES

If you haven't done so already, consider which of your services are best to transition to telehealth visits, including classes and events. Then, create new appointment types specifically for telehealth to differentiate from regular office visits. This is especially important as your appointments shift from all telehealth to a mix of in person and virtual visits. You may also need to create new appointment types based on capabilities, for example, telehealth – phone call or telehealth – video visit. Each new appointment type should also have the appropriate visit length assigned to ensure patients don't leave their appointment feeling frustrated and rushed. To learn more about the telehealth best practices you should implement when creating a virtual patient care strategy, download our complimentary eBook: 10 Telehealth Best Practices.

STAFF AVAILABILITY

Make sure you are prepared to answer calls and schedule patient appointments. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor, the healthcare industry shed 43,000 jobs during the first half of March, reversing a decade of growth in the sector. Depending on whether or not you furloughed staff, you may not be able to reasonably handle an influx of calls once you reopen. Consider outsourcing to a strategic healthcare call center to help manage call volume. You will want to work with your call center partner to provide answers to frequently asked questions, including which visits are now being scheduled, what to do if a patient missed an appointment, available options for telehealth visits, how to prepare for a telehealth visit, etc. We also recommend leveraging call center staff as part of your technical support strategy for telehealth appointments. This team can troubleshoot issues and test the platform with patients until issues are resolved.
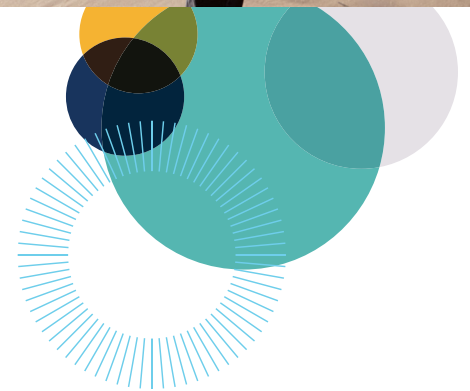
Step 4: Prepare Your Patients

Once you have determined you're ready to reopen, you will want to communicate with patients and set proper expectations about their upcoming visit. You may choose to send a broadcast message to all patients to let them know you are reopening and how you will prioritize the rescheduling of appointments or you may choose to customize your communications based on patient groups such as those with chronic illnesses, those with scheduled appointments, and those whose appointments were previously canceled.

Your patient communications should include information regarding your hours of operation, ways to schedule in-person and virtual visits, and changes to your in-take and waiting room procedures, for example. It will be especially important to alleviate fears and concerns by explaining the measures you've implemented to keep patients safe and healthy. You may also want to be flexible with your appointment cancelation policies during this time. Additional considerations include:

APPOINTMENT SCHEDULING

Make it easy for patients to schedule, confirm, or reschedule appointments in the channel of their choice. We recommend offering both online self-scheduling and live voice scheduling to cater to the various needs of your patient populations. You may also want to send a text message with either a link to your online scheduling solution and/or your phone number to help patients reschedule missed appointments due to COVID-19.

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APPOINTMENT CONFIRMATION & REMINDERS

Use a communication and reminders solution to confirm and remind patients of their upcoming appointments. We recommend leveraging solutions that are capable of strategically sending text messages, emails, or voice communications to drive patient action and adherence. You may also want to consider bundling multiple upcoming reminders into a single communication to prevent message overload. If you don't have a patient engagement platform in place, this is a great time to explore options.

PRE-VISIT INSTRUCTIONS

Patients should know what to expect before arriving at your facility for treatment. We recommend using a communication and reminders solution to provide patients with important instructions as they prepare for their visit. This can include instructions for completing preregistration forms and submitting insurance information as well as new check-in and waiting room procedures. If you will require patients to wear face masks, include those instructions as well.

If your patient has scheduled a telehealth visit, include a link to a test meeting for them to practice using their technology. Technology should be tested several days prior to the appointment using the same device the patient or caregiver intends to use to conduct the telehealth appointment. To ensure patients are ready for their visit, track the test link to see if it was clicked. If not, send reminders to complete this action. Whether an in-person or virtual visit, being fully prepared will help alleviate patient fears and ensure they adhere to their scheduled appointments.

CONSIDER BUNDLING multiple reminders into a single communication to prevent message overload.
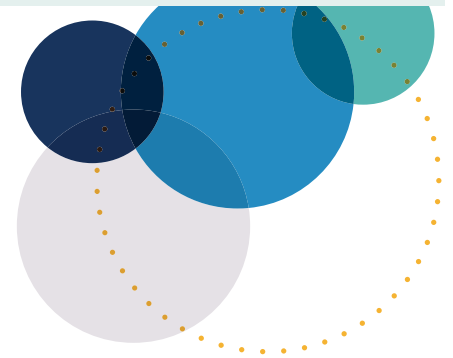
Step 5: Prepare for Growth

According to the American Hospital Association, hospitals are bleeding more than $50 billion per month due to the large number of cancelled elective procedures as well as the costs associated with treating COVID-19 patients. The battle for healthcare consumers has never been more fierce as health systems and clinicians fight to win back patients. To ensure you thrive, make sure you deliver the convenience, access, and value healthcare consumers are looking for when seeking providers. Additional considerations include:

SEARCH ENGINE RANKING

The hardest part of acquiring patients today is getting found in the first place. This requires far more than simply being included on the approved provider list for health insurance companies. When consumers use a search engine to find a service or provider for their needs, does your health system show up under the first few results? Winning the battle for organic search requires consistent efforts that help your brand show up in one of the top spots on the page. To improve your ranking, you'll need to apply best practices for search engine optimization (SEO), including the use of strategic keywords, consistently updated and high-quality content, and social media.

IN RESPONSE TO THE U.S. HEALTHCARE FINANCIAL CRISIS, AS PART OF THE CORONAVIRUS RELIEF PACKAGE KNOWN AS THE CARES ACT, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT BEGAN DISBURSING $30 BILLION IN AID TO HOSPITALS ACROSS THE COUNTRY. ON FRIDAY, MAY 1, ANOTHER $20 BILLION WAS RELEASED.

Tip:

Make it easy for healthcare consumers to take the next step. To make sure you're receiving as many scheduled appointments as possible, optimize what Google displays in your health system's profile on the right-hand side of the results page. Aside from making sure the information is correct, add a link for appointments to create an immediate call to action.

RATINGS AND REVIEWS

Pay attention to your online reviews. If a consumer searches using the term "best," Google often shows only results for businesses with a 4-star rating and above. That's one important reason why it's critical to manage and respond to comments and reviews on your social media and review sites. It's also critical to set up automated review invites to help you automatically gather more online reviews so you can rank higher and healthcare consumers can find you even easier. Your rating is important because you want consumers to compare you favorably with other providers to help you attract new patients.

WEBSITE EXPERIENCE

Don't forget to optimize the patient journey on your website. Often the part of the consumer journey from searching for a new provider to scheduling an appointment is a major source of frustration and confusion. For instance, many websites have separate processes for finding physicians and scheduling appointments. A consumer may spend time locating any number of physicians that meet their criteria on the website but are unable to schedule an appointment with these same providers. In other instances, websites aren't optimized for natural language search queries – those complex phrases and questions that mimic our everyday speech. This can lead to frustration and missed opportunities for conversion when consumers can't find clear, concise, and accurate answers to their questions. To identify speedbumps in your processes, map your patient journey and what a consumer needs to do at each step of the way. Are you making it particularly challenging for new patients to find you? How can you streamline the process of scheduling an appointment?
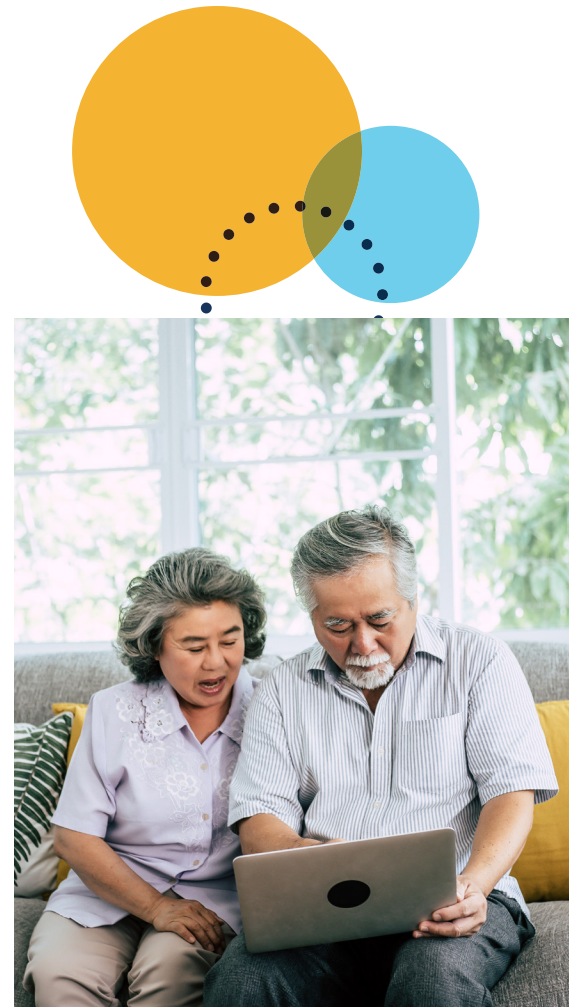
The road to recovery will be difficult for healthcare systems and practitioners, but it's not impossible.

Taking steps now to solve your greatest challenges to patient access, action, and adherence will pay dividends later. This includes extending your reach with online and live-voice scheduling, promoting two-way patient communication, eliminating manual check-in processes, investing in telehealth solutions and other digital tools, and promoting patient self-management. At Stericycle, we protect what matters, and that includes your ability to provide meaningful patient engagement strategies to help you quickly recover from this crisis. Should you have questions or need additional guidance, we're here to help.

For more best practices on how to reopen and reengage with patients, download your copy of our patient engagement timeline and contact us at 1.800.899.7702.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Stericycle COVID-19 Knowledge Center:
https://www.stericycle.com/coronavirus

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid (CMS) Recommendations:
https://www.cms.gov/files/document/covid-flexibility-reopen-essential-non-covid-services.pdf

AMA Physician Practice Guide to Reopening:
https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/covid-19-physician-practice-guide-reopening

MGMA COVID-19 Medical Practice Reopening Checklist:
https://www.mgma.com/MGMA/media/files/pdf/MGMA-Practice-Reopening-Checklist.pdf?ext=.pdf

Modernizing Patient Engagement. Maximizing Patient Outcomes.

Stericycle offers the most comprehensive patient engagement platform in the industry. We are the only provider that seamlessly combines both voice and digital channels to provide the modern experience healthcare consumers want while solving complex challenges to patient access, action, and adherence.

Learn more at StericycleCommunications.com.