

Follow-up Systems

What is a follow-up system?

A follow-up system is a way of controlling the flow of patient information and appointments through the medical office. It includes tracking of results, referrals to specialists, appointments and telephone calls that require follow-up. The goal is to manage clinical information, medical records and paperwork to ensure that all information is available to the physician for clinical decision making.

Do I need a follow-up system for my practice?

Allegations of failure to follow-up can be difficult to defend if you cannot prove that reasonable attempts were made to contact the patient who missed an appointment with a consultant. Reasonable attempts depend on the severity of the patient's condition, the clinical significance of the visit and the risk associated with the missed test or office visit. Often times the physician is totally unaware that the patient failed to return as requested, so months elapse and conditions worsen.

What is the patient's responsibility in returning for follow-up?

Court decisions have held that it is the medical professional's responsibility to make an attempt to contact and encourage the patient to return for needed follow-up. The courts feel that the medical professional appreciates the "seriousness" of the problem more than the patient.

Most Common Situations Requiring Follow-Up

- A patient fails to get a recommended screening or diagnostic test.
- A laboratory, x-ray, or other diagnostic test is not received.
- A patient fails to see a consulting or referral physician.
- A consulting or referral physician does not report findings to the primary or referring physician.
- The progress note in the medical record indicates the need for ongoing care, i.e., follow-up visit, etc.

Essential Elements of a Follow-Up System

- Defining which physician recommendations require follow-up (i.e., an order for a test or procedure, referral, or follow-up appointment).
- An established system for determining compliance with physician recommendations.
- A written policy on how the follow-up/tracking system is going to work.
- A written policy for the retention of tickler file index cards and log sheets.

Various methods can be utilized to develop a follow-up system. Some of the most common include:

- Tickler file using index cards.
- A log book containing a copy of a consultation request or a copy of a written prescription for a test or consultation.

- Follow-up log (sample provided).
- A computer-assisted system.

The examples are intended to be used as guidelines.

Developing a Tickler System for Follow-Up Visits

- A. Obtain an index card file or an accordion file with monthly dividers for January through December.
- B. When a physician indicates the patient needs to return for follow-up on a medical condition, fill out an index card or similar tool with the following information:
 - Patient's name.
 - Patient's telephone number and address.
 - Patient's clinic number if applicable.
 - Reason for return visit.
- C. Place the card in the month the patient needs to return.
- D. At the end of the month, pull all the cards and check to verify if the patient returned for follow-up.
- E. Notify all patients who have not returned.
- F. Document each attempt to contact the patient.

Developing a Follow-Up System for Consultation/Referrals

- A. Use a tickler file with daily dividers.
- B. Complete either an index card or a consultation request form.
- C. File the index card or consultation request form at a predetermined date after the consultation is scheduled. For example, use a week from the date of the appointment as a guideline.

- D. Once the date has passed, verify that the consultant has seen the patient and a consultation report was received. Contact all patients who failed to keep the appointment with the consultant.
- E. Document each attempt to contact the patient.

Developing a Follow-Up System for Diagnostic Testing

The previously described tickler system may also be used to follow-up on patients sent for diagnostic testing, or a follow-up log may be utilized. The advantage of the log is that it gives a clear picture of the flow of information through reporting of the results to the patient.

One person must be responsible for receiving test results and for maintaining the log. The practice must determine when to begin the follow-up and how often. Follow-up should occur for all test results not received.

It is important to include in the system a process for post hospitalization follow-up, when a patient is discharged from the hospital with instructions to return to the office or consultant for essential follow-up care. This may help reinforce patient compliance and also conveys the physician's interest in providing comprehensive healthcare.

Generally, follow-up attempts include one phone call; and if that is unsuccessful, then a postcard or letter. A sample letter is on the next page. The attempts should be documented in the medical record. If the condition is serious, i.e., following a possible cancerous condition, sending a certified letter with return receipt is recommended. This receipt should be filed in the medical record for documentation purposes.

You may wish to remind patients prior to the due date of their scheduled appointment. A pre-appointment reminder helps to reduce the number of patients who fail to keep an appointment; however, it cannot be considered a substitute for follow-up if the patient fails to keep an appointment.

Sample Follow-up Appointment Letter

Dear [MR./MRS./MS. PATIENT]:

On [DATE] you failed to keep your appointment at my office. Please contact the office between the hour of [LIST OFFICE HOURS] to reschedule your appointment.

Very truly yours,
[PHYSICIAN'S NAME]

