

4 Ways to Improve the Patient Experience for Older Patients

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As the population of older adults is expanding, the number of physician/hospital visits may also increase, and an influx of appointments can lead to a decrease in patient care if you're not careful. Every patient, regardless of their age, deserves to experience high-quality treatment.

However, ensuring each step of their journey is designed for ease, and convenience takes effort. Prioritizing the patient experience is worth the time and energy, as it can lead to higher patient satisfaction and, ultimately, higher patient retention — a win-win for you and your patients.

Steps to improve patient experience

As the population ages, physicians are seeing more and older patients. And while these patients do not differ from their younger counterparts, there are some things you can do to improve their experience and make them feel more comfortable.

Improving the patient experience is not only for enhancing retention and care but also for bolstering population health and reducing the cost of medical care. Here are four steps you can take at your practice to make that change:

1. Reduce wait times to see a specialist or doctor.

When patients have to wait for hours to see specialists, they may go elsewhere in search of better service or treatment options. This could cause the loss of valuable customers who would have stayed if they had received better service sooner.

Long wait times are a common patient complaint, ranking among the top five in a study conducted by the Office of the Ombudsman. Practices should strive to improve the patient experience by reducing wait times. Making more appointments and hiring more staff to support those appointments and fill gaps is an excellent way to reduce wait times.

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If you cannot hire more staff, consider adopting new technology, such as Telehealth or a Healthcare Virtual Receptionist, to provide easier access to care and streamline appointments. Patients should be able to track their appointment time to know when they're supposed to arrive. And if there are delays, ensure patients are kept updated on what's happening so they know what's expected of them.

2. The waiting area should be comfortable.

Making the waiting area comfortable demonstrates that a practice cares about the comfort and well-being of its patients. If there's one thing we know about older patients, they're more likely to have mobility issues than younger ones. That means they'll find it difficult to sit for long, especially if they've been waiting for hours already.

Providing comfortable seating, magazines, and books, as well as having a television or radio playing in the background, can give older patients a sense of calm and serenity to replace some of the anxiety that comes with appointment anticipation.

3. Show concern over their symptoms.

Another way to improve your patients' experience is to show empathy toward their concerns. This can be done by showing concern over their symptoms and asking questions about their feelings (e.g., "How is your pain level right now?"). It can also be done by listening when they speak instead of interrupting or talking over them.

Doing these things will show your patient how much you care about them and what's happening in their lives outside of medical appointments, making them feel more comfortable with you.

Teach your staff team how to listen carefully to patients and their families. Instruct them to write questions for the patient to ensure all issues are addressed. Showing concern could also provide timely patient feedback.

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4. Improve communication with patients

Older patients may have difficulty communicating with you because of hearing loss, vision problems and other age-related issues. A caring approach can improve communication with older patients by letting them know you are listening and understanding what they are saying.

It is essential to lead with a person-centered attitude in encounters with patients and your employees, as a culture often trickles from the top down. Answer the phone promptly, introduce yourself to patients, and be helpful and willing to answer all their questions. If they seem restless, be reassuring. If they are worried, be comforting and confident. At the end of your interaction with the patient, be sure to ask if there is anything else you can do for them.

The patient experience is essential to all patients. But it's even more critical for older patients. They are often more vulnerable and may not have the energy or ability to advocate for themselves. Older patients are looking for a healthcare system to take care of them. They want their needs met, and they want to feel heard. They need a healthcare provider who understands their struggles and can help them navigate the system in a way that makes sense.

Many healthcare professionals overlook the patient experience when it should be a priority. Taking that extra moment to acknowledge the older patients at your practice is essential. Treat them like you would treat a friend that is coming to visit. Welcome them warmly, shake their hands, help them with their luggage, and make them feel comfortable. Take these simple steps, and you'll stand out from other providers in your demographic area — and your community will thank you for it.

Reference: Medical Economics