



Responding to patient portal messages

DEBUNKING THE MYTH

There is no federal regulation requiring that only physicians respond to patient portal messages. Depending on the nature of the request, clerical and clinical team members are often the most appropriate individuals to respond to patient messages.

BACKGROUND

The use of text-based secure messaging platforms has increased as a means of clinician-to-clinician and clinician-to-patient communication.^{1,2} Research has shown that from 2019 to 2020, clinician in-basket messages from patients increased by 57% compared to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic average.³

Some organizations require that only physicians respond to all patient portal messages, resulting in diversion of physician time and attention away from work for which they are uniquely trained and qualified.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Introducing a team-based, in-basket management system to triage and address messages that do not need to be seen by a physician can expedite responses to patients, decrease physicians' time spent in the EHR and help reduce burnout.

AMA policy

- [Payment for Electronic Communication H-385.919](#)
- [Guidelines for Patient-Physician Electronic Mail and Text Messaging H-478.997](#)

Resources

- AMA STEPS Forward® Toolkit: [Patient Portal Optimization](#). Accessed September 2024.
- AMA STEPS Forward Toolkit: [A Systematic Approach to Reducing EHR Inbox Burden](#). Accessed September 2024.
- AMA STEPS Forward Playbook: [Taming the EHR Playbook](#). Accessed September 2024.

References

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2. Baratta LR, Harford D, Sinsky CA, Kannampallil T, Lou SS. Characterizing the Patterns of Electronic Health Record-Integrated Secure Messaging Use: Cross-Sectional Study. *J Med Internet Res*. 2023;25:e48583. doi:10.2196/48583
3. Holmgren AJ, Downing NL, Tang M, Sharp C, Longhurst C, Huckman RS. Assessing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Clinician Ambulatory Electronic Health Record Use. *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*. 2022;29(3):453-460. doi:10.1093/jamia/ocab268
4. Berg S. What Doctors Wish Patients Knew About Using a Patient Portal. American Medical Association. June 17, 2022. Accessed September 27, 2024. <https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/digital/what-doctors-wish-patients-knew-about-using-patient-portal>

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The average time spent per patient portal message is 2.32 minutes. And if you're an active, busy doctor, you might get 20 to 40 of these a day.
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–Kevin D. Hopkins, MD, vice chief,
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