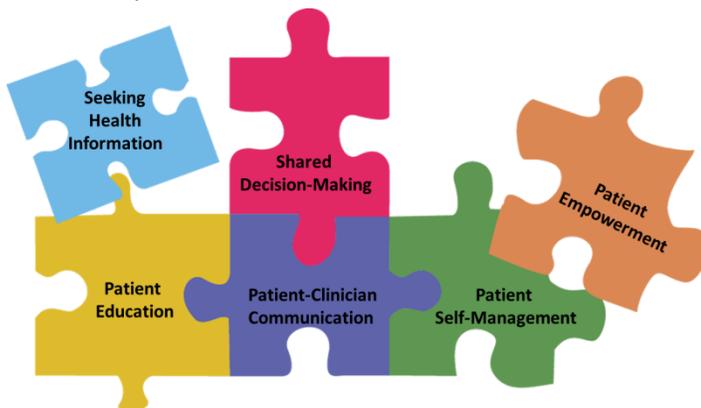# Using e-Health Tools to Engage Patients and Caregivers

What is patient and caregiver engagement?

Engaged patients:

- Seek information about their health and health care
- Make informed and shared decisions with their health care team
- Take steps to manage their health and health care
- Act as partners with their health care team

Engaged caregivers also play a key role, especially when patients have limitations because of age, an illness, cognitive impairment, or other reasons.

Why does engagement matter?

Many studies show that people who actively seek to learn about and manage their health are more likely to participate in preventive and healthy behaviors, self-manage their health conditions, have better care experiences, and achieve better health outcomes.[1,2]

How can e-health tools facilitate engagement for patients and caregivers?

Patient portals, secure electronic messaging, and other e-health tools offer important opportunities to engage patients and caregivers:

- **Patient portals** allow patients to check their lab and other test results and review their health information at their convenience. Patient portals also let patients communicate with their health care team, access educational resources, request medication refills, make appointments, and handle other tasks.
- **Secure electronic messaging** between patients and their health care team facilitates communication between office visits. For example, patients can ask questions they may have forgotten or didn't have time to ask during the visit. They can also share important updates with their health care team.
- **Clinical summaries** reviewed with patients at the end of their office visit can help them to understand and remember what happened during the visit, any changes in their health care plan, and steps to take to manage their health.
- **Patient education resources** enable patients to learn more about their health and health care. Many high-quality decision aids, self-management tools, mobile applications, and Internet-based resources can be provided to patients at the time of their office visit or via a patient portal.

Our patient portal has increased access for patients and improved our ability to provide great service. Patients can access their health records from their living rooms—even send and receive e-mails from their doctor if they have questions. The opportunities being presented to patients to take control of their health are quite remarkable.

— Dr. David Peterman
Primary Health Medical Group
Boise, Idaho

Dr. David Peterman reviewing online tools with mother and patients.

A Focus on Service

Medical practices that engage patients and caregivers by using e-health tools—such as patient portals, smartphone apps, and secure messaging—can improve service and patient satisfaction.[3,4]

Here are some things that patients and caregivers value about using e-health tools:

- Being able to **communicate easily** with their health care team. With secure messaging they can communicate in an unpressured setting at a time that fits their schedule. This helps to avoid the frustration of "telephone tag."
- Having **timely access** to their lab and other test results.

- Having **electronic access to their health records**, which they can review and use at any time.
- Having easy access to **high-quality educational resources**.
- Having the **convenience** of scheduling appointments, requesting medication refills, and completing forms online.

Everyone on the health care team—from front-desk and telephone staff to providers—has an important role in encouraging patients and caregivers to get engaged and benefit from using e-health tools.

References

[1] Hibbard, J., & Greene, J. (2013). What the evidence shows about patient activation: Better health outcomes and care experiences; fewer data on costs. *Health Affairs, 32*(2), 207–214.

[2] Ricciardi, L., Mostashari, F., Murphy, J., et al. (2013). A national action plan to support consumer engagement via E-health. *Health Affairs, 32*(2), 376–384.

[3] Emont, S. (2011). Measuring the impact of patient portals: What the literature tells us. California HealthCare Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.chcf.org/publications/2011/05/measuring-impact-patient-portals

[4] Goldzweig, C. L., Towfigh, A. A., Paige, N. M., et al. (2012). Systematic review: Secure messaging between providers and patients, and patients' access to their own medical records. Evidence on health outcomes, satisfaction, efficiency and attitudes. Department of Veterans Affairs. VA-ESP Project #05-226. Retrieved from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0048536/