

Managing Test Results

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Test results management is an important, but often broken process in many medical practices. Given its importance to delivering quality care and minimizing your malpractice risk, managing test results should be a priority for your practice. Use these tips - from low tech to high tech - to establish or improve your test results management process:

Hold the chart. For patients who have tests ordered, hold their chart out of circulation in a designated area such as a separate shelf. File the charts in date order, pulling them off the shelf as the test results come in. This system facilitates staffer's ability to identify charts with outstanding results, which should be reviewed every week. A similar method is to put a red jacket or some other identifier on the charts as they are filed back in the main records area. The jacket identifies the charts as pending results, and allows the charts to be in a single destination. However, this method does not allow an easy review for charts with results that are untimely.

Develop a log. Record orders in a log, next to the patient's name and an identified (ie, account number). As results come in, highlight the entry. Every week, scan the log to review any entry not highlighted, allowing you to identify and follow up on outstanding results. An asterisk or another identifier could be placed on the entry when the patient is contacted, allowing not only the results to be monitored but also patient notification. A similar method is to use an index card or form to record orders - and pull the card when the results come in.

Install an automated system. Test results management systems are available to purchase. Some vendors specialize in telephone-based systems, others in internet-based systems. Either way, any system you buy should feature a means for staffers to record an order, monitor the order, mark the results, and communicate the results - with the ability to offer comments about them - to patients. The systems are great for test results management, but they do come with a pricetag.

Use your recall function. Most practice management systems feature an appointment recall function, allowing the practice to identify their recommendation for a future appointment and sending a reminder to patients about it. Instead - or in addition to - using it for future appointments, record test orders in the recall module. Direct the recall to your practice based on protocols for time per test, such as a week for a MRI. The recall will identify the

test you ordered, and a staff can check to make sure the result came in and appropriate follow-up was made.

Embrace technology. If you're using an electronic medical record (EMR), test results management should be a key feature you're employing. If you're looking, evaluate this feature of the systems carefully. It should be easy to use, and incorporate all of the functionality desired by a manual system – record the order and the results, identify outstanding results, and document patient notification. If an EMR is not on the horizon, consider building a simple but powerful database to perform the same functions. Call your local community college to inquire about an intern who could help build it. Unless an interface could be built with your existing systems, staffers would still need to record the information about the orders. A simple database, however, can easily function to identify outstanding orders and can be programmed to “push” this information to you instead of your having to look for it.

No matter what the system, make sure that you employ staff who understand the importance of results – and why it's critical not to miss any. A staff who recognizes the implications of results falling through the cracks is the perfect addition to any test results management system you deploy.