The Ultimate Guide to:
HEALTHCARE
SMS

How to ensure compliance, safeguard patient data and improve health outcomes with secure text messaging.

What's inside

The future of healthcare communications

Global healthcare costs are on the rise, with **Deloitte** projecting an annual increase of 5.4% — an estimated USD $10 trillion by 2022. Americans alone are expected to make up around 40% of that total.

And yet, the healthcare industry is still heavily reliant on legacy systems, with providers often using outdated and ineffective methods of communicating with patients and staff. But the industry is edging toward change, emphasizing patient engagement as a central aspect of patient care.

This transition requires healthcare providers to leverage popular communication channels like SMS messaging to reduce costs and improve patient experiences. And the healthcare applications are many, from sending appointment reminders and aftercare instructions to capturing patient feedback.

Your everyday text messaging solutions just won't cut it when dealing with protected health information (PHI). In fact, HIPAA regulations do not allow PHI to be sent via SMS unless it is transmitted over a secure channel (though not all providers comply with this regulation).

But, when implemented properly using a secure SMS platform, healthcare text messaging is the most effective channel for improving patient outcomes.

Healthcare SMS by the Numbers

91%

of patients want to communicate with care teams through text messaging.

Source

59%

of clinical informaticists report unsecure messaging across all clinical roles.

Source

80%

of people would like the option to use their smartphones to interact with health care providers.

Source

Improving patient outcomes with SMS

Communication is one of the healthcare industry's biggest challenges. It's a problem that impacts patient engagement and outcomes, as well as the caregiver's ability to provide effective treatment.

To understand the impact communication can have in a healthcare setting, consider these statistics:

- More than 250,000 deaths occur each year due to medical error, with an estimated **80% from caregiver miscommunication**.

- **More than 30% of medical malpractice cases** are a result of miscommunication.

- Missed appointments and no-shows cost the U.S. healthcare system **$150 billion each year**.

- **25% of hospital readmissions** could be avoided with better communication.

Patient portals were meant to be a solution to the communication problem, but they have been largely ineffective. Though the portals themselves can positively impact patient outcomes, they aren't being used consistently.

SMS, 98% OPEN-RATE

RELIABLE

Based on a **2017 U.S. Government Accountability Office report**, 88% of hospitals and 87% of healthcare professionals provide patients with a way to electronically access their health information. However, only 15% of hospital patients and 30% from other care settings actually use the portal — even if they sign up for it. The factors contributing to this disparity include usability, age, education level and a preference for direct communication.

The problem is that healthcare organizations are trying to get patients to adopt new technologies rather than leveraging the ones they already use. That's why text messaging has become a popular alternative.

We check our phones around 80 times a day, and 98% of texts are opened, with an average response time of under two minutes. The immediacy and convenience of texting make it an incredibly effective — and inexpensive — communication channel across industries, including healthcare.

HIPAA compliant SMS is perfectly attainable, so long as you work with the right communications partners.

COMPLIANT SMS

Healthcare SMS use cases

SMS response rates and convenience make text messaging ideal for almost all caregiver-to-patient communication and internal communication between healthcare employees. And, since SMS enables two-way communication, SMS can streamline and automate repetitive processes and regular communication.

Although the potential use cases for healthcare SMS are broad, most focus on building better patient relationships and improving patient engagement.

Appointment Reminders

Missed appointments are one of the biggest drains on healthcare revenues and patient health. SMS appointment reminders have proven to be one of the best solutions to this problem.

SMS appointment reminders can be automated, which reduces the required effort from healthcare providers and removes the possibility of failing to send appointment reminders. Additionally, SMS communication streamlines the process of rescheduling appointments. So, patients are more likely to schedule and show up for their appointments.

Aftercare Instructions

The majority of healthcare documentation has moved to digital media. And, people have their phones with them most of the time.

Supplementing paper aftercare instructions with SMS aftercare instructions makes the information more accessible and easier for patients to keep. People frequently lose paper documents more than they lose their smartphones, and digital documents are easily backed up and redelivered. In short, patients are more likely to read and follow aftercare instructions when they're delivered via SMS.
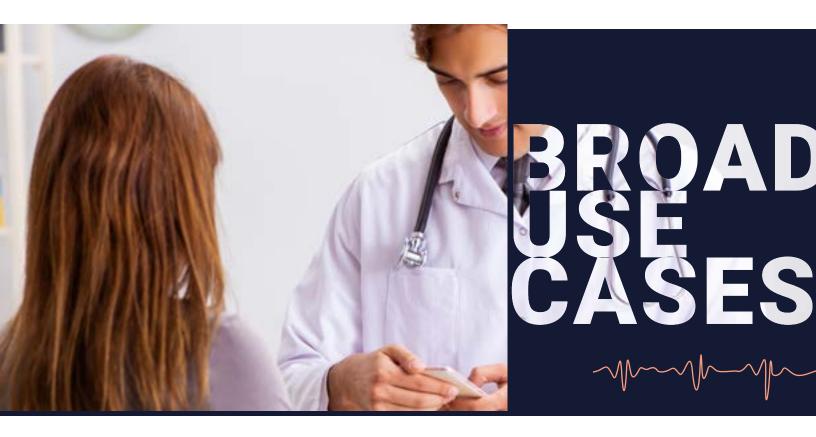
Capturing Patient Feedback

Getting patient feedback can be extremely difficult because there's very little incentive for people to make the effort once they've received their treatment. So, the convenience of SMS significantly improves patient feedback response rates.

Sending feedback requests and allowing patients to submit feedback via SMS is the most convenient feedback channel for patients. SMS also has a massive usability advantage over paper feedback forms, since the feedback is already in a digital format, which is easily uploaded to patient databases or tracking software for aggregation and analysis.

Streamlining Prescription Refills

Automated SMS prescription refill reminders reduce missed refills. Additionally, patients can order prescription refills with a few simple SMS messages. The entire process of ordering refills and scheduling a pickup appointment via SMS can be completed in a minute or two, which means patients are more likely to do it.

BROAD USE CASES

Improving Accessibility to Healthcare Education

Sending medication side effects and diagnostic information via SMS helps ensure that people read and understand the information. SMS delivery also makes it more convenient for patients to retain and reference the material as needed.

Critical alerts and information can be sent directly in an SMS message. Vital, but less urgent, information can be delivered via a clickable link in a text message.

Clinical Trial Recruiting and Feedback

SMS automates and streamlines the process of recruiting and gathering feedback from clinical trials. Patients can opt into or out of a clinical trial by responding to a single automated SMS message, which can be sent to entire patient databases at once. And, SMS is the most convenient feedback channel for patients and clinical trial hosts. Patients can quickly and easily respond to yes/no or multiple choice questions, and the responses are easily moved to digital databases for processing.

There are more potential healthcare SMS use cases. But, the theme is consistent: SMS offers convenient, reliable two-way communication that enables healthcare providers to engage and work with patients for more efficiently than other communication channels.

The role of SMS in COVID-19 Testing and Vaccination

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed almost all previously in-person interactions and experiences to digital ones. SMS has played a major role in the healthcare industry in every stage of the pandemic. To date, it has been used to:

- Notify patients of their upcoming COVID-19 tests and vaccine appointments
- Securely sending links to patients to access their portal for test results
- Notify citizens when identified as close contacts
- Notify citizens when eligibility criteria changes at vaccine centers

Even as we near the end of the pandemic with vaccine rollouts well underway, it is inevitable that the healthcare landscape will continue to leverage SMS for key communications.

HIPAA regulations and SMS

There are **sources** that advise healthcare providers to avoid SMS altogether, because HIPAA regulations around SMS are too difficult to navigate.

However, there is a demand for SMS communication in the healthcare industry. And, HIPAA compliant SMS is perfectly attainable, so long as you work with the right communications partners.

HIPAA compliance for SMS is essentially a matter of encryption and access. Healthcare providers must protect patient data from being accessed by anyone outside of the healthcare organization.

SMS response rates and convenience make text messaging ideal for almost all caregiver-to-patient communication and internal communication between healthcare employees.

CONVENIENT, RELIABLE

What this means for healthcare providers is that they must conduct any SMS communication with patients over a completely secured and encrypted network. This includes networks that are outside the healthcare organization's management, such as telecom carrier networks.

Therefore, HIPAA compliance requires that any SMS provider which transmits healthcare SMS messages must encrypt those messages as long as they are in transit over the carrier networks and protect those messages from being intercepted by third parties.

There are a lot of theories about how a telecom carrier might do this. But, in practice, sending healthcare SMS messages over a private network—without using third-party networks—and encrypting healthcare SMS messages for as long as they are on the SMS carrier's networks is the only way for an SMS provider to meet HIPAA compliance requirements.

This may seem complex. But, healthcare providers can weed out unqualified SMS providers with just two questions:

1. Does the carrier send data only over a network that it owns and operates?

2. Can the carrier encrypt data from end to end?

If the answer to either of these questions is "no," then it is unlikely that the carrier can meet the HIPAA requirements for healthcare SMS.

HIPAA REGULATIONS

Healthcare provider SMS best practices

Healthcare shares many best practices with other industries. However, most healthcare SMS messages are transactional or informative. This means that some of the best practices around brevity and clarity are more vital for healthcare providers than businesses in other industries.

Send all SMS messages through a HIPAA compliant system

One of the biggest challenges for healthcare providers is ensuring that every message goes through their secure, HIPAA compliant devices and SMS delivery system.

It might be tempting for doctors, nurses, and other professional healthcare employees to send SMS message from their personal phones. But, their personal devices may not be connected to a HIPAA compliant carrier.

Establish policies and explain to all employees why they need to use the proper SMS messaging system for patient communication. Bring any external SMS conversations back into the HIPAA compliant system as soon as the external conversation is detected.

Never send PHI in SMS messages

Healthcare provides have no control over what patients do with their phones. Therefore, never send complete PHI in an SMS message.

If you must use the patient's name, use only the first name, or first name and last initial. If a patient sends their own PHI in a text message, never respond to that text message. Start a new conversation. Instruct the patient to call, if the conversation requires discussing PHI.

Minimize stored patient data

Stored PHI is always a security risk. This means that it's safest to delete all text messages once the conversation is concluded. Additionally, SMS messaging contact lists should store contacts with only first name and last initial. Use the middle and last initial if you need to prevent duplicate contacts.

Keep SMS messages short

It is important to be personable when communicating with patients. But, most people don't want any suspense or humor in their healthcare.

Keep your messages under 160 characters to ensure that you get to the point and deliver important information quickly and efficiently. Sending short SMS messages also prevents your messages from being split into multiple texts and bombarding patients with messages.

Avoid casual text abbreviations

Most text abbreviations are too casual for healthcare communication. Unless it's a medical acronym or abbreviation that patients are likely to know and understand, use plain English. This reduces miscommunication and maintains a professional relationship with your patients.

Include clear instructions

If you need a patient to do something, be very clear about the action you need them to take. Also, avoid walking patients through complex tasks in text messages. Typically, you should limit your requests to replying to your SMS message with a single character or word, clicking a link, or calling a phone number, which can also be accomplished by clicking the phone number in the text message.

If your requests are always simple, it's more likely that patients will take action.

Always tell patients who is texting

Is almost guaranteed that patients will not have your SMS short code or long code number in their phone. So, you need to let them know that it's their healthcare provider texting them whenever you initiate a text conversation. Otherwise patients may opt out of your text messages, thinking their healthcare provider is a spammer, or they will not follow your instructions.

Never text patients without their consent

Government regulations require consent before texting patients. The best way to take care of this is to obtain written consent on intake forms. It's also possible to send an opt in text message. If you send a text message to obtain consent, always require the patient to respond to the text message to opt in. If the patient does nothing, it needs to be the same as opting out.

Provide opt out and help instructions

SMS communications laws require that you always provide SMS recipients with instructions for opting out of future text messages. However, this is also a good customer service practice.

Patients will get frustrated if they do not know how to stop receiving messages or change which messages they receive. Then, they may end up calling to request that you stop sending them messages. This strains customer service teams and reduces the number of customers that you can reach via SMS.

Although these best practices are designed for healthcare providers, following the best practices also helps ensure that your SMS communication complies with general consumer data protection laws, like the TCPA.

In short, these SMS best practices make your healthcare SMS communication more user-friendly and help ensure that your SMS program is compliant with HIPAA and other communications regulations.

Healthcare SMS with Telnyx

Using healthcare SMS is entirely possible if you follow the best practices and work with the right SMS provider.

Telnyx provides healthcare providers with SMS messaging over a private, global network with end-to-end encryption. Telnyx owns and operates the entire network. And data is never sent over the public internet or third-party networks.

The Telnyx platform meets the encryption and reliability standards for HIPAA compliance and ensures maximum SMS deliverability. With Telnyx, your SMS messages will never violate HIPAA laws because of security failures outside of your organization, and patients will always receive vital updates and notifications.

Contact our team of experts to learn more about healthcare SMS messaging on the Telnyx network.

TELNYX

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