

Best Practices for Providing After-Hours Care

Providing full continuity of care for patients requires physicians to provide some sort of system to handle patient crises after hours and on weekends. When communication is not available, patients either seek more expensive ER care or deteriorate, leading to more serious complications. Providing 24/7 physician communications is evolving as a professional standard of care and is an integral part of the medical home. Where improved after-hours communications have been implemented, patient satisfaction has increased and ER utilization has declined.



BEST PRACTICES

- PCPs should have an after-hours system in place that ensures that patients can reach the PCP or another on-call medical professional with medical concerns or questions.
- This system should connect callers with a live voice — either an answering service or after-hours personnel — who should either forward patient calls directly to the on-call professional or instruct callers that the professional will return the call within 30 minutes.
- The answering service or after-hours personnel should ask the caller if the situation is an emergency. If so, the caller should be told to call 911 or go straight to the nearest ER.
- If staff or an answering service is not immediately available, the PCP/clinic may use an answering machine with a recorded message that directs callers to call 911 if they have an emergency, and to dial an alternate number (or system prompt) to reach an on-call professional.
- PCPs may provide access to an on-call professional through arranging with other PCPs to rotate call, or by contracting with a triage hotline service staffed by nurses or other clinical personnel.
- Records of after-hours calls should be made and entered into the patient's chart.



AFTER-HOURS CARE PRACTICE ASSESSMENT

To gauge your practice's performance in providing after-hours care, answer the following questions:

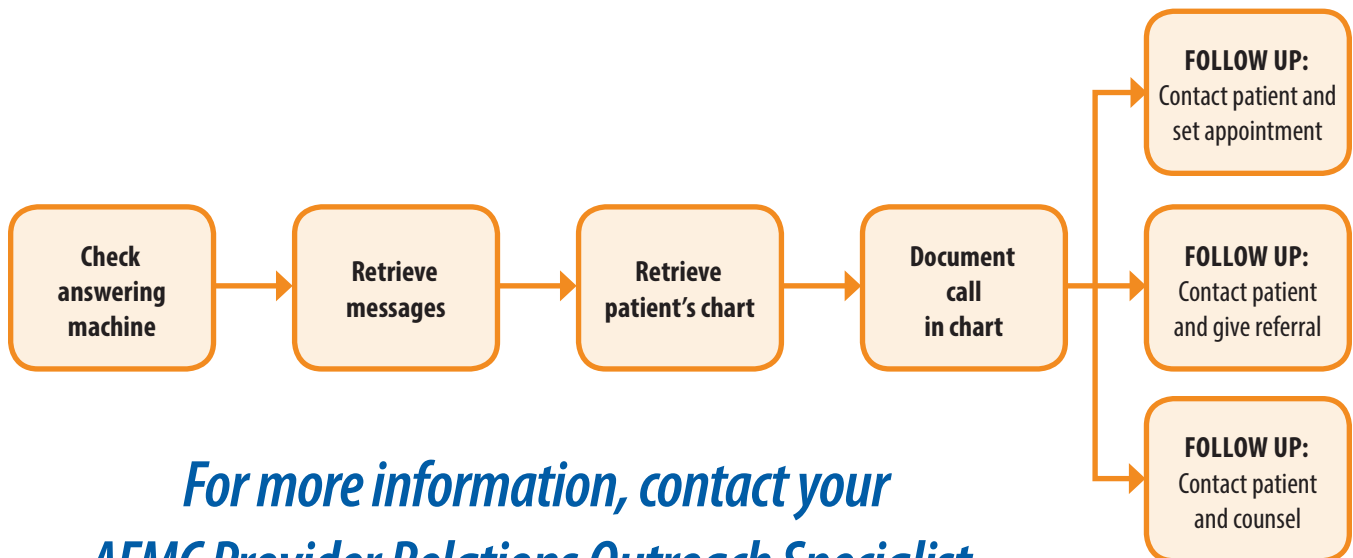
- ✔ Does your clinic provide access to a medical professional — either an on-call provider or a telephone triage service staffed by clinical personnel — to give callers voice-to-voice medical advice and guidance 24 hours, seven days a week?
- ✔ Does your clinic use an answering service or clinic staff to answer after-hours calls?
- ✔ If not, does your clinic use an answering machine that directs callers to dial an alternate number or system prompt to reach a live voice?
- ✔ If your clinic uses an answering machine, do you check it regularly to make sure it's working properly and the recorded message is current?
- ✔ Are non-emergency calls returned by a medical professional within 30 minutes?
- ✔ Are after-hours calls and their results documented and entered into patient records?



Example answering machine greeting

- 1 "You have reached [clinic name]."
- 2 "If this is an emergency, please hang up and dial 911 or go to the nearest hospital emergency room."
- 3 "If this is not an emergency and you would like to speak to an on-call doctor or nurse, please dial [answering service, on-call pager number, triage hotline number, etc]."
- 4 If the alternate number is to an on-call pager, add: "A medical professional will return your call within 30 minutes."

PROCESS FOR RECORDING AFTER-HOURS CALLS INTO A PATIENT'S CHART



*For more information, contact your
AFMC Provider Relations Outreach Specialist.*

