

Patient and Staff Communication Guide

Guidelines for a Safe Reopening During COVID-19

Reopening and recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic will be both an art and a science. Gaining the confidence and trust of your patients and staff will be more important than ever. Clear, credible and consistent communication will be critical to the safety of your patients and the success of your practice. Practice leaders have an opportunity right now to listen, learn, innovate and communicate to ensure your practice emerges strong and positioned for growth.

This document provides staff and patient communication guidelines and tools for the three phases of reopening.

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Business continuity in a sustained crisis is challenging, but it also presents a unique opportunity to meet changing expectations and make meaningful connections that can positively differentiate your practice.

By using this guide and effectively communicating with your staff and patients, you can:

- Gain and maintain the trust of your patients
- Establish alignment and confidence among team members
- Create a safe and compliant practice environment



Overview

In this phase, practices are closed. Staff and patients are not allowed in the office except for emergency cases. This phase often starts quickly and without warning, so practice leaders must be prepared to act fast.

Priorities

Communicate:

Deliver timely, clear, credible and consistent information.

Listen:

Establish channels for connection and input from staff and patients.

Set expectations:

Staff and patients will want to know what to expect next. While a timeline may not be possible, you can instill trust and confidence by outlining the immediate next step and any actions you may be taking.

Communication Guidelines for Staff



Email

- Utilize email to keep teams updated and connected.
- Ensure employees have access to email outside of the office.
- Use email to follow up with teams or individuals after meetings.



Pulse Surveys

- Depending on the size of your team, you may also consider employee pulse surveys. Employee pulse surveys provide valuable insights into how employees are managing through waves of change and what is needed to support them.



Team Meetings

- Host virtual team meetings using video conferencing software.
- Potential agenda items: staff feedback, policy/procedure changes, regulatory updates, downtime expectations.

Tips for running a virtual team meeting



1. Start virtual meetings five minutes before stated start time to make sure technology is functioning properly.
2. Open the meeting by inviting every team member to share what they are working on or a highlight from the previous few days.
3. Slow down: wait 3 seconds after another finishes to begin speaking.
4. Encourage participants to mute if not speaking to reduce background noise.
5. Send out meeting notes and next steps following the meeting.



One-on-One Meetings

- Host regular one-on-one meetings virtually or over the phone with staff to check in, answer questions and set clear expectations on roles and responsibilities.



Communication Guidelines for Patients



Email/Phone

- Call or email to reschedule appointments, ensuring office is actively communicating with patients.



Website

- Your website will be the first place patients will check for information. Add alert or copy to homepage with office closure information and contact information. Update as needed.



Email and/or letters

- **Immediate:** Outline specific updates to procedures/protocols; open for emergencies (include what does emergency mean, how to contact office if emergency occurs); how to contact office with questions or feedback.
- **Ongoing:** Share regular updates with patients. If a governing body makes a decision relevant to your practice, interpret and communicate next steps with patients as soon as possible—even if there is no change.



Office Signage

- Create sign for front door of office for those who missed other communications and show up at practice.



FAQs

- Develop and update list of frequently asked questions and answers to be used in patient phone calls, emails, social media comment responses, and other communications to provide consistent information to patients.



Overview

In this phase, practices are allowed to re-open, but in a limited manner under a new set of guidelines and policies. Patients and staff may feel uneasy about being out in public and coming into the office. Practices must be ready to carry out new ways of operating and prove compliance to maintain patient and staff safety and trust.

Priorities

Educate:

Ensure staff and patients understand what to expect and follow new protocols.

Connect:

Engage staff and patients to support safety, understanding and trust.

Communication Guidelines for Staff



Email/Phone

- Email and/or call staff to share news of partial re-opening.
- Provide details on policy changes, expectations and next steps.
- Confirm email receipt and understanding or call until reached.
- Keep staff engaged to clarify questions and concerns.
- Share emails on ongoing basis to make sure all major updates are communicated in writing in addition to face-to-face interaction/meetings.



Office Signage

- Create office signage to help keep new procedures and policies top-of-mind.
- Could include sanitization checks, handwashing reminders, or patient interaction best practices.
- Signs at key areas in office to remind staff of important new practices.



Pulse Survey

- Pulse surveys are surveys sent to employees periodically to gauge sentiment, operating climate and overall employer performance over time
- Continue administering and evaluating pulse surveys to understand employee sentiment and address any needs or challenges.



Daily Meetings

- Host brief daily team meetings to ensure alignment.
- Encourage feedback during the meeting and promote confidence and trust.
- Potential topics: policy updates, review learnings, address areas for improvements, new local, state and national safety guidelines, address patient feedback and response plan.



Checklists and Tools

- Create checklists and other tools to help staff implement and track adherence to new guidelines and policies.

Tips for a crafting an effective pulse survey

- ✓ Use a tool like Survey Monkey or Qualtrics for easy survey set-up and distribution.
- ✓ Keep the survey brief to make participation easy—no more than 5 minutes or 15 questions.
- ✓ Start by sending the survey out monthly and adjust frequency as needed.
- ✓ Include an open-ended question for additional comments.
- ✓ Communicate and act on findings.



Communication guidelines for Patients



Phone

- Reach out to patients to reschedule appointments.
- Prepare, document and share call script, FAQs and best practices for addressing patient concerns or requested accommodations.
- Regularly update FAQ with questions heard during patient visits.



Office Signage

- Create office signage to clearly communicate new protocols.
- Include signage immediately outside office and upon entry.
- Potential topics: overview of new practices, signage on where to sit, screening policy, floor clings for social distancing measures, front desk signage for staff interaction.



Email *(and text, if regularly used with patients)*

- Send emails to all patients regarding updated policies and practices, screening process and waiting room changes.
- Share clear guidelines on who can enter the office, what types of cases will be treated, any limitations, and new infection prevention practices/guidelines.



Thank You Notes *(digital or physical)*

- Use thank you notes as an opportunity to connect with patients
- Consider including link to complete post-visit patient survey.



Website

- Update website with new or changed information, policies, and resources.



Social Media

- Use social media to inform and engage patients.
- Include content related to changes, but also begin sharing content according to your typical communication strategy.



Videos

- Record a series of short videos to send to patients via email and/or social.
- Potential topics: Our approach to re-opening, the new office experience, our PPE, Office signage, sanitization process.



Tips for recording a video message

Videos can be shot on your phone—they do not need to be highly produced.

Keep video messages short—no more than 2 minutes.

Wear a solid colored clothing.

Choose an area with a simple background and no visible patient information.

Keep your phone close so the microphone can pick up clear audio.

Shoot in an area with natural light (in front of you, not behind you).



Visit Follow-Up Survey

- Email brief survey to patients after visits to understand overall patient experience and effectiveness of communications and operations.



OFFICES CLOSED



REOPENING



REESTABLISHMENT

Overview

In this phase, practices can resume patient care, perhaps with some permanent policy changes. Practices should maintain the strong communication and engagement practices established in earlier phases. Now is also a great time to re-assess your business continuity and crisis communication plan for the future.

Priorities

Connect:

Maintain strong communication and engagement practices established in earlier phases.

Evaluate and Prepare:

Evaluate response to initial incident and prepare for future events.

Communication Guidelines for Staff



Pulse Survey

- Continue administering and evaluating pulse surveys.
- Evaluate findings to address any needs or challenges and identify opportunities for growth.



Communications

- Return to normal communication schedule.
- Make updates based on feedback.

Communication Guidelines for Patients



Visit Follow-Up Survey

- Email brief survey to patients after visits to understand overall patient experience and effectiveness of communications and operations.



Communications

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Communication During COVID-19 Checklist

Team and Leadership

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| | Select a dedicated leader and/or cross-functional task force to stay current on the rapidly changing situation. |
| | Activate and refresh plans, including work-from-home guidelines, patient service continuity and team management. |
| | Model calm behavior while providing organizational clarity. |
| | Set clear expectations for employees and patients. |
| | Connect frequently with direct reports and teams. |

Process and Tools

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| | Communicate clear guidance on employee policies, procedures and available support (e.g. sick leave, payroll). |
| | Ensure technology and supply needs are addressed. |
| | Establish guidance for how to use and leverage internal communication channels. |
| | Share best practice information to help workers take care of themselves, stay connected and remain productive where possible. |
| | Be thoughtful about external brand marketing or messages that could be misperceived. |

Content and Cadence

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| | Provide regular, proactive updates – even if there’s nothing significantly new to share – to minimize speculation and help put people at ease. |
| | Keep teams connected through daily and weekly meetings or check-ins. |
| | Communicate simple, factual information from credible sources to help maintain trust. |
| | Use a multi-channel approach to engage internal and external stakeholders. |
| | Act in alignment with practice values and culture. |

Notes: