

Patient access remains a challenge as medical groups recover from staffing shortages

Only about one in five medical groups managed to improve patient access in 2023, reflecting challenges from staffing shortages and surging patient demand.

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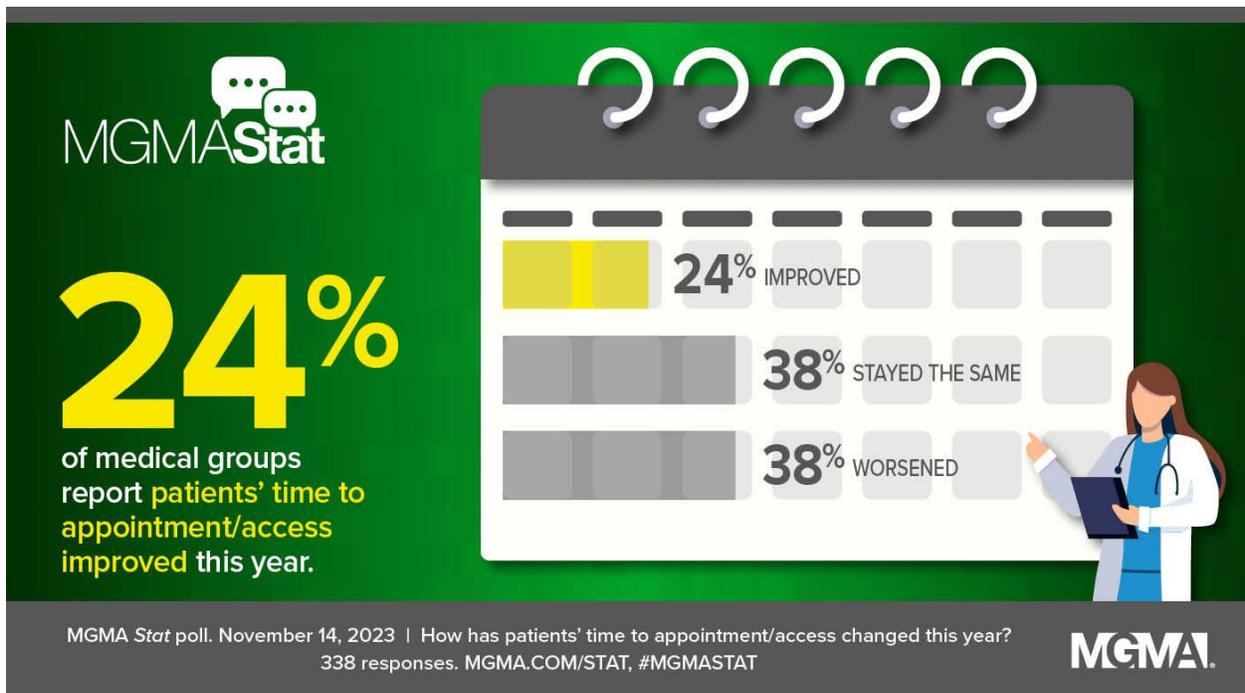
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Do you not have enough providers and staff, or have you just underestimated patient demand? Both can have negative impacts on a medical practice's access, but the solutions will take different shapes.



A Nov. 14, 2023, [MGMA Stat](#) poll sought to understand how time to appointments and overall patient access had changed this year, and the results paint a rough picture: Only

24% of medical group leaders report their patient access improved this year, while 38% said it stayed the same and another 38% noted that patient access had worsened in 2023. The poll had 338 applicable responses.

These findings come despite a concerted effort across many healthcare provider organizations to address the impacts of staffing shortages and surging patient demand in previous years. An [October 2022 MGMA Stat poll](#) found that nearly two-thirds (66%) of medical groups added or improved patient self-service tools in 2022, while nearly six in 10 (59%) of those that didn't were considering upgrades this year.

Patient access in 2023: Not all appointment issues are alike

All respondents to this latest MGMA *Stat* poll were asked which factors most impacted their practice's patient access in 2023, revealing some interesting findings:

- Even though three out of four medical groups reported their patient access either stayed the same or worsened, there was a sharp divide in their explanations.
 - Among those with worse patient access, the issue of surging patient demand was more frequently cited than other factors.
 - However, those whose patient access stayed the same versus last year were more likely to note they struggled with staffing to ensure enough physician availability to keep time to appointment at a reasonable level for new and established patients.
- Respondents whose practices improved patient access did not have one standout factor to point to, instead citing a range of influences:
 - Upgrading scheduling systems within the EHR, including online check-in
 - Adopting open-access scheduling models and template modifications
 - Changing how the referral stream is processed
 - Hiring more physicians and clinical staff to increase appointment availability.

Patient access during the pandemic roller coaster

As noted in the [2023 MGMA DataDive Practice Operations](#) data report, [“Restoring Balance to Patient Access and Medical Practice Operations.”](#) workflow improvements and innovations such as telehealth helped time to third next available appointment (TNAA) for new patients — a key patient access metric — drop by half since 2019, from 10 days to only five days in 2022.

THIRD NEXT AVAILABLE APPOINTMENT (IN DAYS)				
	2019		2022	
	New patients	Established patients	New patients	Established patients
Primary care specialties	10	2	5	3
Nonsurgical specialties	16	7	15	11
Surgical specialties	9	6	11	7

PERCENT OF APPOINTMENTS THAT ARE SAME-DAY		
	2019	2022
Primary care specialties	10%	16%
Nonsurgical specialties	5%	5%
Surgical specialties	5%	4%

SINGLE SPECIALTY AGGREGATE RATES*		
	2019	2022
No-show rate	7.00%	5.00%
Appointment cancellation rate percentage	25.99%	11.26%
Percent of appointments rescheduled within 30 days	50.00%	79.50%

*Single Specialty Aggregate combines primary care, nonsurgical and surgical single specialty practice data.

Sources: 2020 and 2023 MGMA DataDive Practice Operations

A closer look at 2022 benchmarks: Appointment availability

- Established patients can be seen by their provider sooner than new patients by two to four days. However, new patients are typically able to get in sooner than they were pre-pandemic, and the wait for established patients is a little bit longer (compared to pre-pandemic numbers).
- More same-day appointments are available for primary care visits compared to pre-pandemic levels.
- Total wait times have increased by one to four minutes in the past year and are up to seven minutes longer than they were pre-pandemic.

A closer look: No-shows, cancellations and rescheduling

- Practice no-show and appointment cancellation rates continue to remain lower than pre-pandemic levels.
- Of the appointments that were canceled, by either the patient or practice/physician, the majority are rescheduled within 30 days. Appointment reschedule rates continue to remain well above pre-pandemic rates.

Other resources

- [“Staffing to demand: How a medical group illuminated staffing needs”](#)
- [“Enhancing patient access by empowering front desk staff through phone system improvements”](#)
- [“Don’t let the labor shortage hurt your patient access”](#)

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