1. Adjust Your Perception.

Too often, physicians and staff view patient wait times as a fixed byproduct of the unpredictable nature of healthcare scheduling.

Between factors like patient no-shows, emergencies, and staffing issues, it's common to simply assume that waiting is unavoidable and a permanent part of the equation. The first step is to realize that wait times can be significantly improved — albeit, most often through targeted process changes.

— Marshall A. Maglothin, MHA, MBA, health care engagement partner, Tatum, an executive management firm
2. EMPLOY AN ORGANIZED FRONT OFFICE STRATEGY.

Segregate duties at the front desk, so you don’t have one person trying to balance it all. Have dedicated staff for each responsibility, whether that’s answering phones, scheduling, or checking patients in and out.

For both providers and staff, if at all possible, arrive to the office early. This gives you ample time to get settled and organized before the appointments begin for the day.

— Charlene Mooney, consulting executive, Halley Consulting Group

3. SCHEDULE SIMILAR APPOINTMENTS TOGETHER WHENEVER POSSIBLE.

Schedule specific clinics, such as blood pressure checks or Coumadin draws, together on the same day whenever possible.

By grouping similar appointments, staff will minimize the time spent transitioning between differing levels of care. And on the flipside, patients will spend less time waiting too, thanks to streamlined and systematic scheduling.

— Charlene Mooney
4. GIVE PATIENTS MORE CONTROL OVER SCHEDULING.

Improve wait times, convenience, and ease of access to care by giving patients more control on when and where they’re seen.

With an increasing number of “Express Care” options, patients can simply walk in and see a designated provider – all without making a phone call or appointment. And online self-scheduling allows patients to schedule a same-day or future appointment at their convenience.

– Fahad Tahir, chief executive officer, Saint Thomas Medical Partners, Nashville, Tenn.

5. DEVELOP MULTIDISCIPLINARY PROTOCOLS.

Develop state-of-the-art multidisciplinary protocols for major illness categories – whether for chest pain, abdominal pain, or head injuries, for example – and adopt them throughout the practice or department.

These protocols are designed to include physician orders, nursing procedures, and suggested labs and X-rays. And when a patient’s presentation qualifies them for the protocol, providers follow the pre-determined standards automatically, saving significant time.

– Steve Berkowitz, chairman of the board, Texas Institute for Healthcare Quality and Efficiency; former chief medical officer, St. David’s Healthcare in Austin
6. MINIMIZE SERIAL PROCESSES, EVALUATE PARALLEL PROCESSES.

Split tasks and procedures into serial or parallel processes. In a serial process, each required step adds to the total time involved. Reducing the time spent per step will reduce the overall time.

In a parallel process, focus only on the longest step. Consider if three diagnostic tests are ordered with the following turnaround times: labs (30 min.), X-ray (60 min.), and ultrasound (90 min.).

All tests must be completed before patient dismissal, so reducing the time required for the longest step (ultrasound), will have the greatest positive effect on wait time.

– Steve Berkowitz

7. UTILIZE WEB-BASED TECHNOLOGY.

Web-based technology, like online check-in systems, offer patients the option to wait for appointments at a place of their choosing.

After a quick check-in process, the patient’s place is held in the queue. When the office is ready for them, a text message is dispatched to notify the patient. As for the initial check-in, it’s quite simple: Patients go online, select their clinic location, and enter their full name and cell phone number. Successful check-in is then confirmed via text message.

– Joleen Haxton, vice president of ancillary services,
  NextCare Holdings, Inc. (NextCare Urgent Care)
8. ENCOURAGE PATIENT PORTAL USAGE.

Besides the meaningful use Stage 2 incentive tied to patient portal usage, physicians can also realize improved patient wait times by encouraging portal access. Patients can fill out paperwork, submit insurance information, and access critical updates using this method.

To overcome patient reluctance, participation should be simple and intuitive. Providing a user-friendly app for mobile access may prove helpful.

– Stuart Hochron, physician, Jersey City Medical Center; cofounder, health app developer Practice Unite

9. COMMUNICATE WITH PATIENTS ABOUT DELAYS.

Many practices are starting to request that patients call the office prior to their arrival.

For example, an office might request that patients call in one hour before their appointment. At that time, the patient is advised if the physician is running on schedule. If the office typically runs about two hours late, the staff will be able to alleviate the anxiety of the patient waiting by suggesting a more appropriate arrival time instead.

– Michelle Katz, LPN, MSN, healthcare consultant and author
10. COLLECT PATIENT FEEDBACK.

Devise efficient ways to collect patient feedback. We’re currently rolling out a patient satisfaction survey via iPad, at the point of care, that will allow patients to provide feedback immediately.

Don’t forget to analyze the feedback too, and develop workaround solutions as needed. If an issue does arise, like dissatisfaction with wait times, address it without delay.

— Fahad Tahir

11. ADMIT WHEN YOU’RE WRONG.

Despite your best efforts, there will still likely come a time when you’re running behind schedule, forcing a patient to wait longer than is ideal. So when this happens, have a back-up plan.

Respect your patients’ time by staying on schedule. But if you run late, apologize. Better yet, offer them a $5 gift card for a cup of coffee.

— Pamela Wible, family physician and author