

## Telephone Triage and Counseling

**Telephone triage** care management has increased access to high-quality health care services and empowered parents to participate in their child's health care. Consequently, patient satisfaction has significantly improved. Unnecessary emergency department and clinic visits have decreased, saving health care costs and time (with less absence from work) for families in need of health care.

Telephone triage is more than “just a phone call” because a child's life is a high price to pay for poorly managed or incompetent telephone assessment skills. Typically, guidelines for telephone triage include asking screening questions; determining when to immediately refer to emergency medical services (dial 911) or the emergency department; and determining when to refer to same-day appointments, appointments in 24 to 72 hours, appointments in 4 days or more, or home care ([Box 4-1](#)). Successful outcomes are based on the consistency and accuracy of the information provided. A systematic review of 49 studies where nurses triaged calls found that the appropriateness of a decision and subsequent compliance often varied ([Blank, Coster, O’Cathain, et al, 2012](#)). A meta-analysis of 13 studies provided further insight and found patient compliance with triage recommendations were influenced by the quality of provider communication ([Purc-Stephenson and Thrasher, 2012](#)). The importance of nurse-patient communication is reinforced as an essential aspect of telephone triage training. Training of communication skills that are patient and family-centered and specifically address active listening and advising skills offers the greatest opportunity for success. Assessment skills used in direct nurse-to-patient interactions are not directly transferable to the telephone and provide further support for training in decision-making skills for phone triage ([Purc-Stephenson and Thrasher, 2010](#)). Evidence-based clinical protocols for telephone triage can provide a structured method for assessment ([Stacey, Macartney, Carley, et al, 2013](#)).

### **Box 4-1**

#### **Telephone Triage Guidelines**

Date and time