



Healthcare Dropouts: The Quiet Crisis

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Healthcare providers strive to deliver great care to the patients they see. But what about the patients they don't see? Across the country today, there is a population of patients who could get care, but delay or forgo it completely. We're calling them healthcare dropouts. And no healthcare provider – whether large or small, whether fee-for-service or value-based – can afford to ignore them or let them sit on the sidelines.

At ZocDoc, we are in the business of understanding patients, their needs and pain points. So we partnered up with award-winning research firm Kelton Global to ask more than 2,000 Americans about their biggest healthcare challenges. We set out to learn:

- Who is dropping out of the American healthcare system?
- Why do patients become 'healthcare dropouts'?
- What can we do to bring passive patients back into the fold?

What we found has implications for every player in the healthcare industry – especially providers. As we'll explore below, great care and patient engagement must now extend far beyond the walls of the exam room.

Who are healthcare dropouts?

Millennials, women, and parents are withdrawing from healthcare at the highest rates. Below are three key findings:

Millennials are more likely to drop out than older patients.

With little disposable time and high expectations (accustomed as they are to digital, consumer-first experiences), these 'young invincibles' are less likely than their older counterparts to get needed care – whether acute or preventive.

- 93% said they have delayed or not scheduled a checkup (v. 74% non-Millennials).
- 68% say managing their personal health is a struggle (v. 57% non-Millennials).
- Only 55% of Millennials are likely to keep a scheduled checkup on the books (v. 72% non-Millennials).
- They're nearly 2X as likely to cancel or reschedule a checkup because they're "too busy."
- If they experience difficulty scheduling a checkup via phone, they're nearly 2X as likely to wait "a few weeks or longer" to try again.

More than men, women are giving up on care.

Although men have a reputation for neglecting their health, we found that women consistently reported less engagement in their healthcare.

- 82% have delayed or not scheduled a checkup (v. 78% of men).
- 64% say it's a struggle to manage their health (v. 58% of men).
- 66% would rather wait out an illness than make a doctor's appointment right away (v. 52% of men).
- 46% say it's easier to self-diagnose than see a doctor quickly (v. 39% of men).

Parents are putting their own care last.

Parents are caregivers for everyone but themselves. More than half (53%) of parents would recommend a same-day appointment for a loved one feeling unwell, but only 30 percent would make the same effort for themselves.

- Nearly as bad as Millennials, 91% of parents have delayed or not scheduled a checkup (v. 75% of non-parents).
- 65% of parents say it's a struggle to manage their health (v. 59% of non-parents).
- 53% of parents would recommend a same-day appointment for a loved one feeling unwell, but only 30 percent would make the same effort for themselves.
- They're nearly 3X as likely to cancel or reschedule a preventive visit.
- They're nearly 2X as likely as non-parents to wait a few weeks or longer to schedule a checkup if it was difficult the first time.

Why do patients drop out of preventive care?

Busy lives and a **complex and antiquated healthcare system** stand between patients and good care.

Routine visits are seen as unnecessary or not worth the trouble.

Many patients seem to view their bodies much as they view their cars. If everything is running smoothly, why bother getting a tune-up?

- 26% said they don't book because they don't have any symptoms.
- 25% don't realize how much time has passed since their last appointment.
- 20% just forget.
- 20% said that appointments need to be booked too far in advance.
- 17% can't get out of work.

Even if patients do schedule an appointment, life gets in the way.

Patients lead busy lives and healthcare can be unaccommodating. They end up cancelling/rescheduling their appointments for a number of reasons:

- Work commitments (48%)
- Family conflicts (47%)
- General busyness (32%)
- Forgetting (28%)

Why do patients drop out of acute care?

When fast access is a challenge, patients **tough it out solo**. Even when they're sick, 26% of patients wait more than a week to get care.

Healthcare just isn't quick or convenient enough for patients to bother.

Patients want to book on their own terms and see a doctor quickly. If they can't, they're more likely to avoid care or turn to self-diagnosis.

- 31% said it's hard to get a last-minute appointment.
- 27% can't get out of work/don't have enough time.
- 22% would go to an urgent care clinic or ER instead.
- 19% said it's too late/early in the day to reach the doctor's office.
- 43% said it's easier to self-diagnose than to quickly access a doctor.
- 59% prefer to tough it out on their own.

Even acutely ill patients perceive the doctor as a last resort.

Because last-minute healthcare is a hassle, many patients will only pursue it if their health is not improving or getting worse. Patients report that they will only go to the doctor if:

- They experience new symptoms (47%).
- They think they need a prescription (38%).
- Self-diagnosis and self-treatment isn't working (37%).
- They aren't well enough to go to work (33%).
- They're trying to avoid ending up in the ER (33%).

How can we get dropouts to drop back in?

It's time for healthcare to meet patients where they are – with a seamless, simple, modern experience that puts them in the driver's seat. Three key findings:

Healthcare needs to catch up with consumer-first, digital experiences.

As powerful brands like Amazon and Netflix continue to reset patient expectations, the high-friction healthcare experience becomes increasingly archaic in comparison. Patients already see healthcare as one of their most painful responsibilities.

Sixty-one percent of people described healthcare as a struggle to manage – more than have trouble with:

- Personal finances (42%).
- Household responsibilities (35%).
- Career goals (25%).
- Family obligations (18%).

Give patients choice, transparency, and personalization. They expect it.

The message from patients is clear: They would be more likely to promptly schedule checkups if providers would:

- Allow them to pick their preferred appointment time. (This is confirmed by ZocDoc's proprietary data. While the average nationwide wait-time to see a doctor is 18.5 days, patients who book via ZocDoc choose to see a doctor much sooner. The typical ZocDoc appointment takes place within 24 hours.)
- Send reminder emails or texts.
- Not make them schedule so far in advance.
- Give them the ability to book 24/7, not just when the doctors' office is open. (Patients also express this preference via their ZocDoc booking habits. In fact, nearly half of appointments (45%) are booked after the provider office is closed.)

Access is a particularly painful issue and must be fixed.

The old-fashioned experience of booking an appointment by phone is one that many patients find unpleasant and discouraging:

- One in four (24%) Americans say it's tough to reach a person when they call a doctor's office.
- If patients are not successfully scheduled on the first call, 26 percent wait at least a few weeks to try making an appointment again, if they even attempt to or remember at all.
- Perhaps that's why 80 percent of Americans would book a doctor's appointment online. Why? They say it is more convenient or they can do it at any time, even when the doctor's office is closed.

Conclusion

The rise of the healthcare dropout is troubling for health systems. Whether fee-for-service or value-based, providers rely on patients who are engaged and willing to make an office visit. But as this study shows, life gets in the way for many patients; they simply aren't willing to persevere through an unaccommodating or archaic experience. The many points of friction in a patient's journey may seem individually insignificant. But in combination, they form a real barrier to early detection and intervention, continuity of care, positive clinical outcomes, and more.

The good news is that patients do not seem to be dropping out due to a lack of desire or knowledge. They want to get the care they need, and many know what they should be doing. In other words, there is a tremendous opportunity to help patients – especially millennials, women, and parents – better prioritize their healthcare by removing friction and structural deterrents. Doing so will mean attending to the needs that patients are voicing, which are both reasonable and feasible.

What must health systems do to reengage healthcare dropouts? Encouraging patients to “drop back in” will require:

- **Improved access.** Same-day and next day appointments are crucial.
- **Digital convenience.** Patients want seamless online/mobile appointment booking.
- **Tailored follow-up.** To keep up with care, patients need relevant, personalized messaging.

But these changes are more than a short-term stratagem. Getting ahead of the curve will only be possible for providers and care organizations that can see themselves through patients' eyes – and deliver the outstanding experience that patients expect and deserve.