

## Risk Tip: Handling Non-compliant Patients

A patient's non-compliance has many underlying causes. These include, but are not limited to, the patient's economic hardship, cultural beliefs and practices, lack of understanding about the physician's expectations, lack of trust or confidence in the physician or the treatment plan, lack of self-confidence to follow the physician's advice (e.g., lose weight, quit smoking, etc.) and religious beliefs.

A physician must determine the reason for a patient's non-compliance, if at all possible. A face-to-face discussion can be extremely productive if you explain:

- Why you prescribed the course of treatment, medication or physical therapy
- What you hope to accomplish through this course of treatment or therapy
- How the prescribed therapy could benefit the patient
- What possible complications and risks are associated with the treatment
- Which patient roles and responsibilities will help you achieve a good outcome
- Ask the patient if the recommendations are achievable.
  - If the patient says "no," ask why.
  - Once you determine the underlying cause, solutions may be possible.
  - Additional patient education tailored to the particular patient's needs may help.
  - Likewise, patient reminder emails, cards and phone calls can aid compliance.
  - Take steps to ensure all communications and materials are easy to understand, avoiding complex technical explanations and medical terminology.

Keep in mind that a patient generally has a right to refuse any medical care for any reason. And some patients may prefer alternative therapies, even if they're not your preference. What you deem to be patient non-compliance may actually be a patient coming to an informed decision to refuse care or choose another type of care after weighing the treatment options.

In these situations, it is your role to ensure the decision/refusal actually was informed, just as you would with obtaining the patient's informed consent. Your discussion with the patient should include your rationale behind your proposed treatment or diagnostic study, its potential benefits, complications, risks, consequences of refusal, and possible alternative therapies or procedures.

Sometimes, a little dialogue is all that's needed to get to the root of the problem and turn a non-compliant patient into a willing, compliant participant.

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