CPCPracticeSpotlight50

Comprehensive Primary Care is an initiative of the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Innovation

A Simple Ask: How One Request Can Quickly Engage and Activate Patients

Firstcare Medical Group, Lyndhurst and Verona, NJ; independent; 5 physicians, 8 PAs; 14,000 patients

July 17, 2015

CPC Change Driver 1: Comprehensive Primary Care Functions

- 1.2: Planned Care for Chronic Conditions and Preventive Care
- 1.4: Patient and Caregiver Engagement

For more information about the CPC initiative, visit http://innovation.cms.gov/initiatives/Comprehensive-Primary-Care-Initiative/.

Situation: George Ambrosio, MD, knows that patients who follow a tailored plan of care are more likely to successfully manage their health conditions. He follows a simple two-part process to engage his patients with obesity and a co-morbid condition. First, he asks them to track behaviors that affect their health. Second, when patients return for the critical follow-up visits, he starts and maintains a collaborative dialogue based on what they learned.

Innovation: When patients track their behaviors, it sparks what Dr. Ambrosio calls their "mindfulness," which opens the way to meaningful activation and engagement in their care plans.

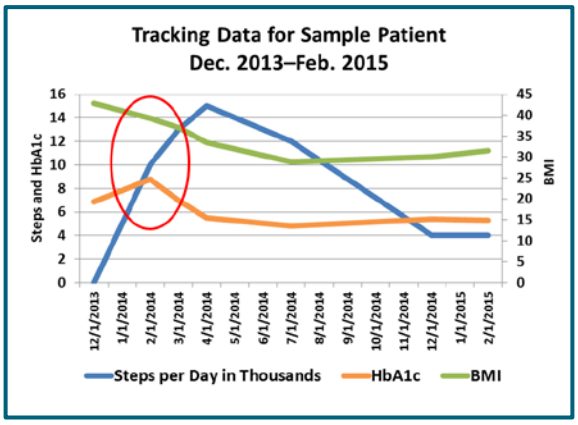
Tracking is kept simple and tailored to the patient. To help patients track their daily activity by way of counting their steps, the practice provides a pedometer or shows the patient how to download a fitness app to their smart phones. Patients also track three foods, such as sugary drinks (including alcohol), bread and cheese. The food log is adapted to the patient's lifestyle and habits and patients may substitute other foods to track, such as candy, rice or fried foods. However, the list is limited to three foods to keep it manageable for the patient.

Patients then bring completed logs to the follow-up appointment, which is timed according to the patient need for support. This varies between a week to four weeks, but the necessity of a timely follow-up visit is emphasized to the patient as an important part of the patient's care plan.

Before each follow-up visit, care managers call or text patients with encouraging reminders about logging activity and food choices. They offer support or share helpful resources, such as a www.TheWalkingSite.com. This outreach helps keep patients on track and it also assures patients that Dr. Ambrosio and his team are available to offer continual support.

At the report back and every follow-up visit, Dr. Ambrosio starts by asking, "Where's your log?" and "How do you think you're doing?" Then he listens. Patients frequently take the lead, sharing revelations, such as "The five coffees I drink every day have 14 teaspoons of sugar each," "I eat ice cream every night" or "walking around the block is easier than I expected." This heightened awareness then guides collaborative goal setting between Dr. Ambrosio and his patient, based on the patient's abilities, feedback and willingness. He believes patients respond because they feel genuinely listened to and cared about, and "no one cares what you know, until they know you care," he says, paraphrasing Teddy Roosevelt's famous quote.

Dr. Ambrosio also explicitly tells patients that "exercise is medicine." He points to research from the American College of Sports Medicine that shows consistent exercise over time can create the same health benefits as many prescribed medications. Hearing their physician "prescribe" exercise stresses its importance and helps patients correlate increased activity to their overall wellbeing and not just a weight-loss strategy.



Above: Run chart used with patient described in this story. The red oval highlights a point of considerable improvement and correlates to the patient's increased exercise.

One example of how this engagement helped a patient is shown in the chart on this page. Dr. Ambrosio and his team had been treating Barb*, a middle-aged, obese woman with diabetes, for many years. At a December 2013 check-in, Dr. Ambrosio asked her to start tracking her daily steps and three foods. By February 2014, Barb made considerable progress, averaging 10,000 or more steps per day. Over 12 months, her BMI dropped from 43 to 27 and her A1c dropped from 7.5 to 5.2. In late 2014, she wavered from her exercise commitment and by February 2015, her BMI increased to 31 and her A1c to 6.2. Barb is currently working on increasing her exercise and is back on track to once again improve her BMI and A1c.

Sustainability: Dr. Ambrosio believes the challenge is to maintain the patients' mindfulness of their behaviors after they have achieved their health outcome goals. Patients with acute needs are seen frequently, but those who reach their goals have less intensive care management from the practice. To this end, Dr. Ambrosio is exploring how patients can stay engaged by reporting steps and other metrics through an online platform. This would help patients and their care team monitor and promote healthy behaviors before adverse health outcomes develop.

**Name changed to protect patient privacy.*

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