The real cost of delayed care

How health systems can reduce the average
26-day wait for patients

In major U.S. metropolitan areas, patients now wait an average of 26 days to see a physician in **five key specialties**: family medicine, dermatology, cardiology, obstetrics-gynecology, and orthopedic surgery.[1] In those 26 days, minor health issues can escalate, chronic conditions can worsen, and patients might seek care elsewhere — or abandon it altogether.

AMN Healthcare's comprehensive 2022 survey of more than 1,000 physician practices tells a concerning story. Across 15 major metropolitan areas, the time between booking and receiving care has jumped

24% since 2004[2]

This trend especially impacts non-emergency, lower-acuity care — the routine visits and preventive care that form the foundation of community health.

The implications reach beyond individual patient frustration. As wait times stretch longer, health systems face increasing challenges in managing patient flow, maintaining continuity of care, and capturing much-needed revenue from net-new patients

Several interrelated challenges create and compound the growing delay between scheduling and receiving care. Read on to learn the causes of long wait times, the ripple effects they create, and emerging tools that can ease patient access and improve health system results.

The root causes of long wait times

System-level issues

Health systems face unprecedented staffing pressures. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), the U.S. will face a shortage of 86,000 physicians by 2036.[3] This shortfall spans both primary and specialty care.

Meanwhile, capacity management remains a persistent challenge as health systems attempt to balance patient demand across available resources.

[1] Physician Appointment Wait Times Have Increased Significantly, Survey Finds
[2] Survey of Physician Appointment Wait Times
[3] New AAMC Report Shows Continuing Projected Physician Shortage

Complex scheduling journeys

The scheduling infrastructure at many health systems creates overly complex journeys, leading to dead ends that frustrate patients. Take, for example, a healthcare consumer looking to find an orthopedic specialist. They first need to find a health system's find-a-doc page, then they must either answer a set of questions in a **"decision tree"** or make multiple clicks to book an appointment.

What do they get for all that effort? Too often, they discover their time slot is gone or that their provider has no openings. What's worse, they don't get any alternate options, leaving them stranded. As a result, patients seek care elsewhere, costing health systems' revenue and inhibiting their growth potential. Just as concerning, patients may decide to book an appointment out of sheer frustration without any intention of actually following through, creating costly no-shows or last minute-cancellations. On average, each no-show costs health systems about $200 per hour.[4]

Overburdened providers

Clinicians' time is valuable, especially considering the average primary care provider (PCP) spends 36.2 minutes in the EHR per patient visit.[5] To help their providers feel a sense of balance, health systems must find ways to maximize the time doctors can spend practicing at the top of their licenses. Yet doing so is challenging.

Without full visibility into patient scheduling across all of a health system's entities, doctors often spend too much time seeing the wrong patients. This occurs when an MD sees a patient for something a PA or NP could easily manage, such as a blood pressure check and medication refill. The same is true if an orthopedic specialist sees a patient with low-level back pain who would've been better suited seeing a PCP.

Integration complications

Many health systems have access to provider directories, self-scheduling technology, care navigation tools, and virtual care platforms, but integrating these tools into e-commerce style patient-friendly workflows is a significant challenge.

Despite the surge in telehealth during the pandemic, health systems still struggle to integrate virtual care into their scheduling systems. **Only 41% of physicians believe they have the technology** to deliver virtual care seamlessly, and many providers report challenges with workflow integration and optimal use of digital solutions. And on the self-scheduling front, even today roughly 88% of all appointments are still scheduled by phone.[6]

Wait times create ripple effects for patients and providers

Extended wait times create a cascade of health consequences. When routine conditions go untreated, they often escalate into more serious medical issues. This is particularly evident in chronic condition management, where delays in care can lead to deteriorating patient health and preventable complications.

The impact varies by location, but urban and rural areas face significant challenges. In urban areas, high patient volumes stretch provider capacity to its limits, leaving doctors overwhelmed and unable to see patients promptly. In rural communities, provider shortages create significant gaps in care access, forcing patients to wait weeks for appointments simply because too few doctors are available.

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[4] Missed Appointments Cost Providers $150 Billion Annually
[5] Primary care visits run a half hour. Time on the EHR? 36 minutes
[6] Patients love telehealth—physicians are not so sure

Stress on both sides of the stethoscope

The human cost of extended wait times affects both patients and providers.

Patients experience anxiety and frustration as they wait weeks for appointments, often worrying about worsening symptoms. This anxiety (and escalations in symptoms) can lead to increased emergency department visits — a less-than-optimal solution for both patients and health systems.

Long wait times also affect providers. Some physicians face overwhelming patient loads that lead to burnout. Meanwhile, other providers — particularly advanced practice providers — may be underutilized, creating professional frustration and missed opportunities for patient care.

According to recent data by Medscape:

49%
of physicians
reported burnout

20%
of physicians
experienced depression[7]

The economic consequences of delayed care

In an era of tight margins, health systems need more net-new patients to remain profitable. But extended wait times drive patients away from health systems and into alternative sites of care.

Long wait times and inefficient resource management can send patients directly to rival health systems in competitive healthcare markets. When consumers face long delays at one health system, they often turn to competing hospitals and medical groups in their area that offer faster access to care. This competition for patients is especially fierce in metropolitan areas where multiple health systems vie for market share.

At the same time, **more than 11,000 urgent care centers** have popped up nationwide since 2010, and that number is growing at 7% annually.[8] Urgent care sites offer the convenience many patients seek, pulling revenue away from traditional health systems.

The financial strain extends beyond lost patients. Inefficient resource management creates significant operational inefficiencies when physicians are overwhelmed with appointments while nurse practitioners and physician assistants remain underbooked. Health systems that fail to balance their provider workforce face both revenue losses and increased costs from suboptimal distribution of patient care.

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[7] Nearly half of doctors report burnout, but there is some progress
[8] Why urgent care centers are popping up everywhere

DexCare's comprehensive platform

DexCare's real-time care orchestration platform helps health systems match patient demand with available resources.

Finding Time for Care

Improved Access ⟷ ⟷ **Optimized Capacity**

Digital Care Orchestration Platform

| Provider Data Management | Care Traffic Control | Tracking and Analytics |

Attract — **27%** more organic traffic

Attract new patients by capturing more patients at the point of discovery. With DexCare's digital discovery capabilities, patients can schedule a provider, clinic, or virtual visit in just one click. On the back end, health systems can manage their entire ecosystem of providers to ensure real-time availability for patients.

Guide — **81%** higher total conversion rate

Guide patients to best-fit care by matching the intent of a patient's search with the most clinically appropriate resources available. With care navigation, organizations get more control, allowing them to offer cross-sell options, gently nudge patients to the desired avenues of care, and balance supply and demand more effectively.

Book — **24%** up to 24% net new patient acquisition

Book patients faster with smart scheduling that works seamlessly with existing EMR systems and displays real-time availability across locations. Patients can access care more easily while health systems maintain optimal capacity – all without navigating complex decision trees or reaching booking dead ends.

Care — **9-min** visit duration (well below avg.)

Expand care with Virtual OnDemand, a high-velocity video system for queuing, booking, and conducting virtual visits. Virtual OnDemand simplifies telehealth workflows for providers and enables quick, efficient visits averaging just seven minutes, well below the national average.

All of these features are powered by a single set of data pulled from EMRs and various third-party software platforms. Real-time insights let health systems know which providers, service lines, or venues are overutilized or underutilized and adjust accordingly.

Smart solutions for the 26-day wait time challenge

Current self-scheduling applications on the market today only chip away at patient wait times. DexCare is different. It's a modern care orchestration platform that improves patients' scheduling journeys and aligns health system resources so organizations can balance supply and demand.

Our platform analyzes real-time data on provider availability and patient demand, matches patients with the right type of care and provider for their needs, and optimizes appointment distribution — while maximizing clinical resources and reducing administrative overhead. As a result, providers operate at the top of their licenses, while health systems make the best use of their existing resources.

How Piedmont Healthcare cut wait times by 5 days

When Piedmont Healthcare faced challenges with complex booking systems and unreliable availability displays, it needed a solution to prioritize patient experience while improving operational efficiency. After implementing DexCare, Piedmont **transformed its patient scheduling experience.**[9]

The new system created a frictionless booking process that begins at the initial Google search and smoothly guides patients to available appointments. The personalized experience includes suggested best-fit care options and virtual visits. As a result, Piedmont reduced appointment wait times by five days.

Piedmont
HEALTHCARE

[9]How fast can your health system grow with DexCare? Find out now

Moving beyond the waiting game

As healthcare systems confront increasing wait times, the need for innovative solutions has never been more urgent. These delays affect every aspect of healthcare delivery, from patient health outcomes to provider satisfaction to system financial stability.

Digital care orchestration platforms like DexCare offer health systems a path forward, helping match patients with appropriate care while optimizing clinical resources. Through smart scheduling, virtual care options, and intelligent resource balancing, health systems can reduce wait times while improving both the patient and provider experience.

Ready to reduce wait times at your health system?
Schedule a DexCare demo today.

Visit dexcare.com to learn more.