Older adults and technology:
Creating an age-inclusive, digital-first patient intake strategy

Phreesia

Introduction

For many healthcare leaders, implementing new technology feels like a zero-sum game.

On one hand, there's little doubt that younger patients will embrace it. Research shows that Millennial and Gen Z patients prefer to go online to make appointments, consult with their providers, refill prescriptions, access test results and more.[1] Most of them own digital devices, and they dominate social media and the internet more than any previous generations.[2] Young people are comfortable using technology to work, shop, learn, play and socialize—and they want it to play a bigger role in their healthcare experience, too.[3]

On the other hand, it's often assumed that patients age 65 and older don't understand how to use smartphones or the internet. Worse, they may be averse to technology altogether. Even advertisers reinforce ageist stereotypes[4] that suggest older adults are unwilling to adapt—and for healthcare leaders, that misconception fuels hesitation to implement new patient-facing technologies. If older patients don't feel comfortable digitally managing their health, they may avoid doing so, which could mean they don't get the routine care they need.

However, the stereotype of an older adult struggling to understand technology is extremely outdated. By 2019, nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults age 65 and older were online,[5] and that was before the pandemic prompted their technology usage to skyrocket.[6] Older adults are now the fastest-growing demographic on social media,[2] and they're spending far more time on screens than they did a decade ago.[5] Those trends are influencing the healthcare space, too, as older adults increasingly embrace telehealth, digital pharmacies[7] and web-based socialization[8] to support their physical and mental health needs.

This digital democratization of healthcare has given patients of all ages—equipped with online aptitude and a surplus of choice—more ownership over their care than ever before. They now expect providers to offer the modern, convenient features they're accustomed to using in retail spaces, and organizations that don't embrace those features risk losing patients to their competitors.

For many healthcare organizations, implementing new technology can seem overwhelming—especially amid mounting pressures to improve clinical quality, control costs and adapt to new reimbursement models.

Yet all those goals are inextricably linked. Building an age-inclusive, digital-first strategy better engages patients in their care, which can help improve their clinical outcomes. And enhancing the care experience promotes patient satisfaction and retention—ideally boosting healthcare organizations' performance in value-based care arrangements.

> Provider organizations that seize the opportunity to **better understand and respond to older patients' changing behaviors will have an enormous advantage** as they compete for aging Americans' loyalty.

About this white paper

This white paper draws on results from a Phreesia survey conducted in February and March 2022 of patients who checked in for their doctors' appointments using the Phreesia platform. Of the 4,136 patients who completed the survey, 14% were age 65 and older, and 74% had commercial insurance. Our goal with this paper is to shed light on older adults' technology usage and perceptions, and to share best practices that healthcare organizations can employ to engage these patients in their care, improve their experience and boost their loyalty and retention.

# Addressing the technological shift

A decade ago, it would not have been misleading to suggest that older adults' technology usage was low. As recently as 2013, just 18% of adults age 65 and older owned smartphones.[9] Now, that percentage is north of 70%, AARP research shows.[10] In fact, 88% of adults age 70 and older use their smartphones daily.[11] Indeed, people of all ages are now comfortable using mobile devices— and that shift is radically changing the way healthcare is delivered.

Check-in

Checking in online isn't just a Gen Z demand. Older adults want that flexibility, too, and the proof is in the numbers. In Phreesia's survey, more than half of patients age 65 and older (53%) said they checked in for a healthcare appointment online in the past year, and 68% of those patients used their mobile phone to do so.
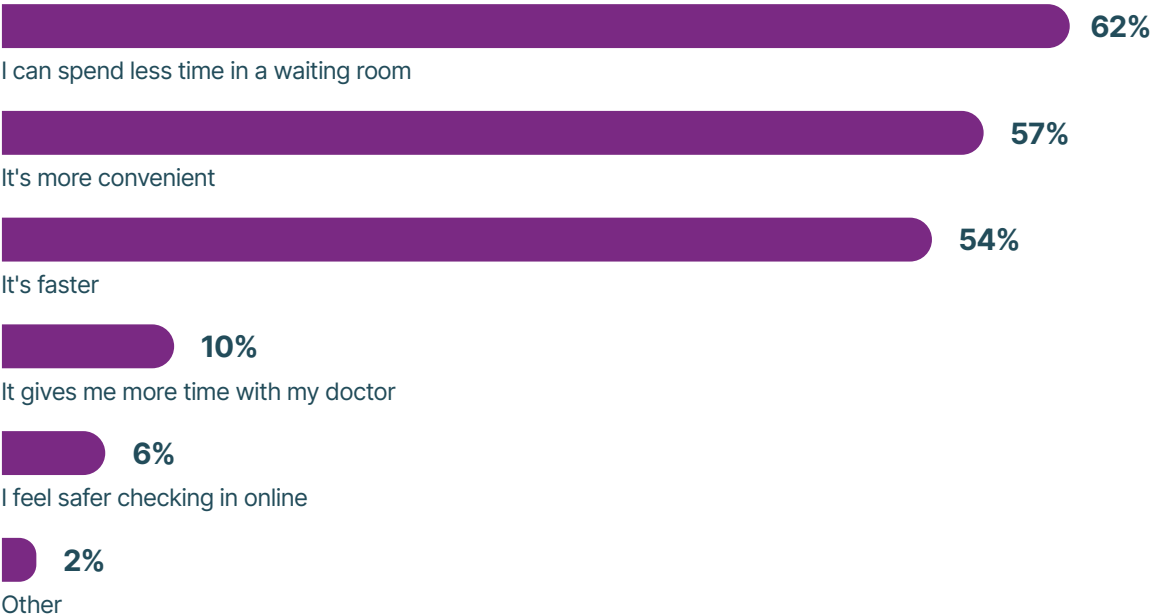
How older adults are checking in

Among those who checked in online for an appointment in the past 12 months (n=328)

Mobile	68%
Desktop	32%
Tablet	16%
Other	4%
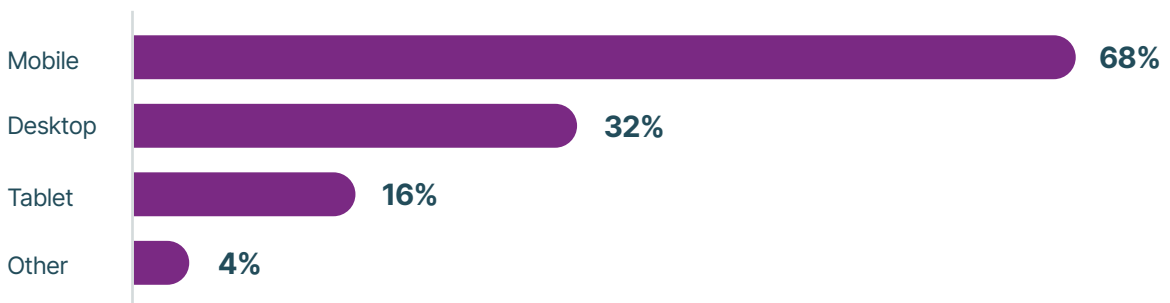
Why are so many older patients checking in online? It boils down to two key pillars: convenience and flexibility. Patients of all ages want to skip the waiting room, and they aren't eager to fill out registration forms by hand. They want to maximize face time with their doctor, rather than with front-office staff. Not surprisingly, 55% of Phreesia-surveyed patients age 65 and older said they prefer healthcare organizations that offer online check-in, and 26% said they consider it a "must-have" when choosing a doctor.

Why do you prefer online check-in for your doctors' appointments? Please check all that apply.

Among patients age 65+ who prefer to see doctors that offer online check-in (n=309)

62%
I can spend less time in a waiting room

57%
It's more convenient

54%
It's faster

10%
It gives me more time with my doctor

6%
I feel safer checking in online

2%
Other

Indeed, the way organizations interact with their customers has changed across the board. A 2022 MuleSoft report found that 72% of customer interactions are now digital, and 93% of organizations say the speed of digital transformation is faster than it used to be.[12] The same is true in healthcare. Before the pandemic, it wasn't uncommon to spend 20 minutes or more in a provider's waiting room before an appointment.[13] COVID-19 changed that, demonstrating the convenience of bypassing the waiting room—and older patients are not eager to go back.

📅 Scheduling

Adults of all ages are used to going online to make dinner reservations, book plane tickets and check into hotels. When it comes to scheduling a healthcare appointment, older adults expect that same convenience.

More than two-thirds of Phreesia-surveyed patients age 65 and older (67%) said they likely would schedule or reschedule their appointments online in 2022, if given the option. What's more, one-quarter of older patients (26%) said they consider the ability to book, reschedule and confirm medical appointments online a "must-have" when choosing a doctor.

The main reason? It's faster. Among older patients who scheduled doctors' appointments online in the past 12 months, nearly half (49%) said they did so because it was faster than booking over the phone. Just like their younger counterparts, older patients appreciate the convenience of online scheduling—particularly when they can easily go online to find an appointment slot that accommodates their schedule.
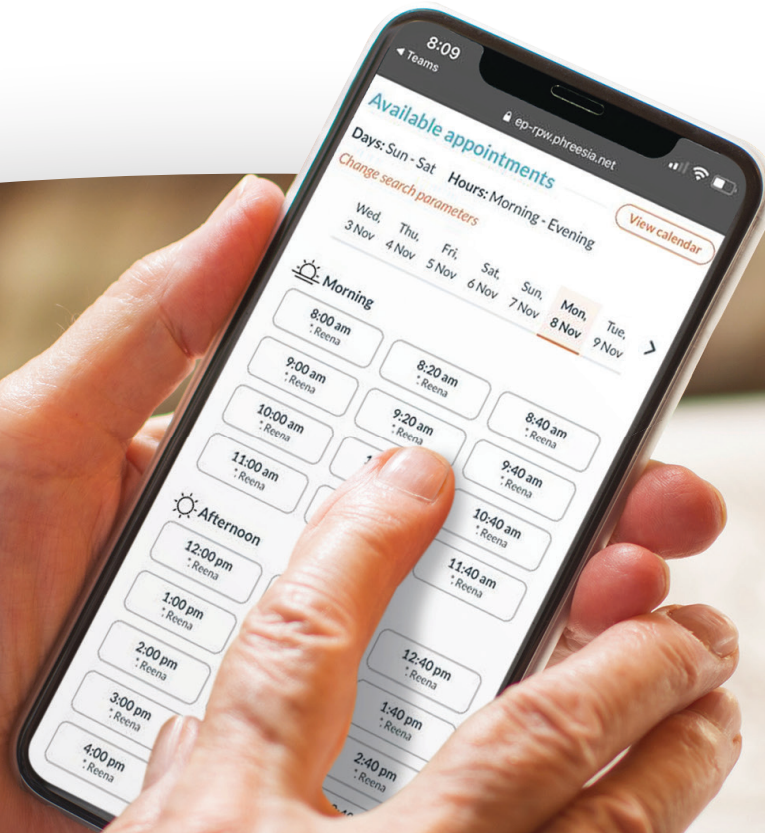
Older adults' scheduling preferences

Percent of patients age 65+ who said they "definitely" or "probably" would do these online in 2022 (n=4,561)
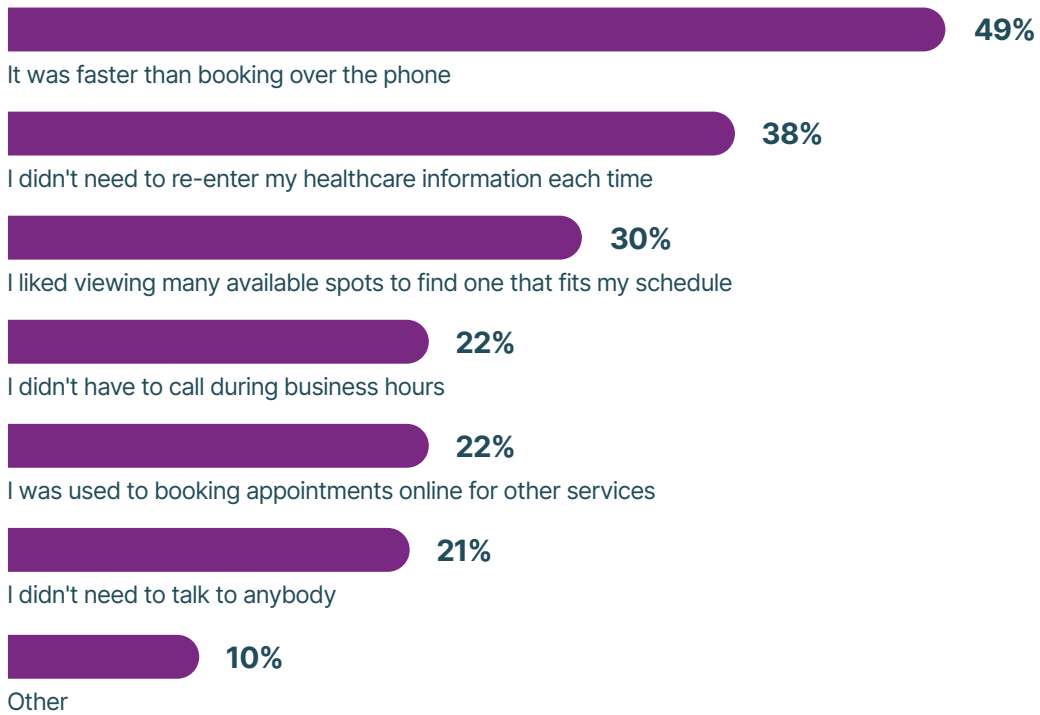
67%
Book appointments

67%
Reschedule appointments

Why did you book your appointment online in the past 12 months? Please check all that apply.

Among patients age 65+ who scheduled online in the past 12 months (n=144)

49%
It was faster than booking over the phone

38%
I didn't need to re-enter my healthcare information each time

30%
I liked viewing many available spots to find one that fits my schedule

22%
I didn't have to call during business hours

22%
I was used to booking appointments online for other services

21%
I didn't need to talk to anybody

10%
Other

Healthcare organizations increasingly view online scheduling as an efficiency driver, and for good reason: Nearly 60% of doctors' appointments are booked outside of office hours.[14] When patients have round-the-clock access to schedule a visit, it alleviates the need for extended practice hours or additional staff. It also better aligns healthcare organizations with broader industry trends, as 22% of Phreesia-surveyed adults age 65 and older said they're accustomed to booking appointments online for other services.
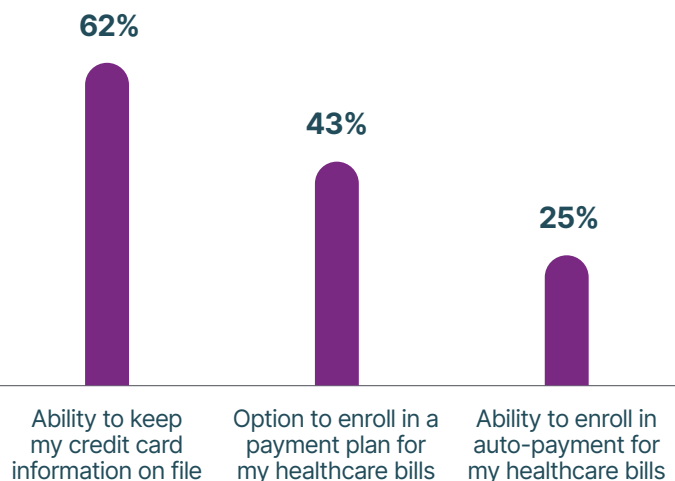
Payments

Though healthcare's adoption of digital payment options lags the broader market, it's still rising fast. In Phreesia's survey, 23% of patients age 65 and older said they paid their medical bills online in the past 12 months. But a much larger share (52%) said they likely would pay online in 2022, if given the option.

When it comes to paying online, patients don't want just one option—they want several. In fact, more than one-third of older adults surveyed by Phreesia (37%) said they want their provider to offer at least one of the digital payment features listed in the survey—payment plans, automatic payments and the ability keep a credit card on file.

Which payment features do older patients want most?

Responses shown for respondents 65+ that chose at least one digital payment feature mentioned in the survey (n=169)

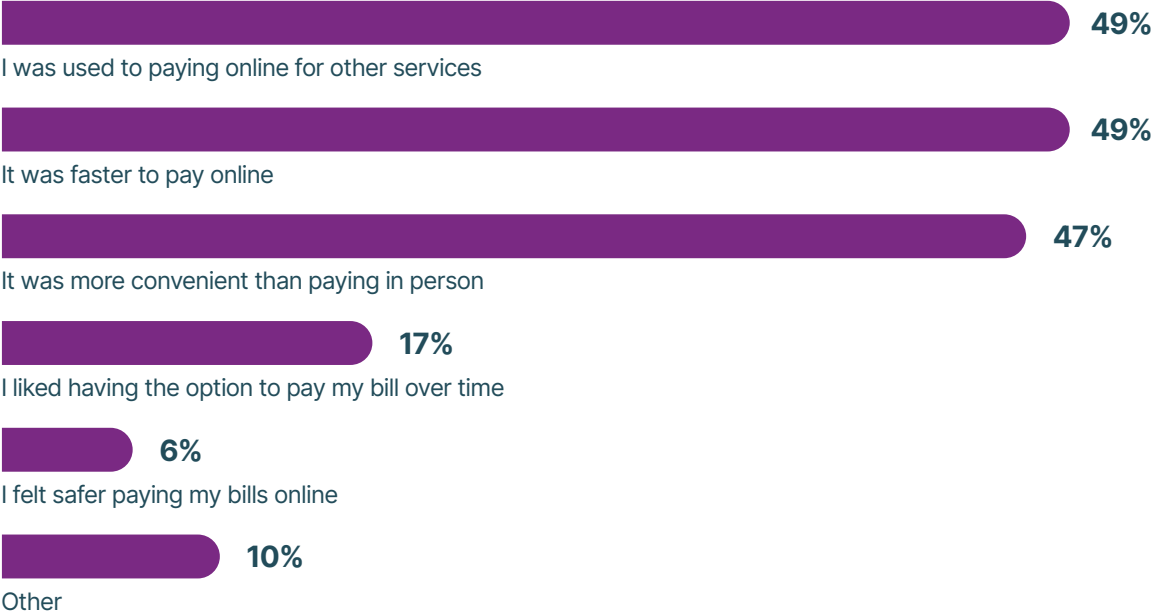| Feature	Percentage
Ability to keep my credit card information on file	62%
Option to enroll in a payment plan for my healthcare bills	43%
Ability to enroll in auto-payment for my healthcare bills	25%

Flexible payment channels certainly have been a boon for other industries. According to research from McKinsey & Company, 82% of U.S. consumers used digital payment methods for online, in-store and person-to-person transactions in 2021 as tech-oriented billing habits moved further into the mainstream.[15]

That trend is reflected in Phreesia's research, too. Nearly half of patients age 65 and older who paid medical bills online in the past year (49%) said they did so because they're used to paying online for other services. Similar shares of older patients said they paid online because it's faster and more convenient than doing so in person.

Why did you pay your medical bills online in the past 12 months? Please check all that apply.

Among patients age 65+ who paid online in the past 12 months (n=117)

I was used to paying online for other services	49%
It was faster to pay online	49%
It was more convenient than paying in person	47%
I liked having the option to pay my bill over time	17%
I felt safer paying my bills online	6%
Other	10%

Older patients are readily embracing modern payment methods—and healthcare organizations that offer them are sure to benefit. Leveraging patients' evolving bill-paying habits helps practices increase revenue, decrease hard costs and collect more at the time of service. It also helps providers deliver an inclusive, convenient financial experience for patients of all ages.
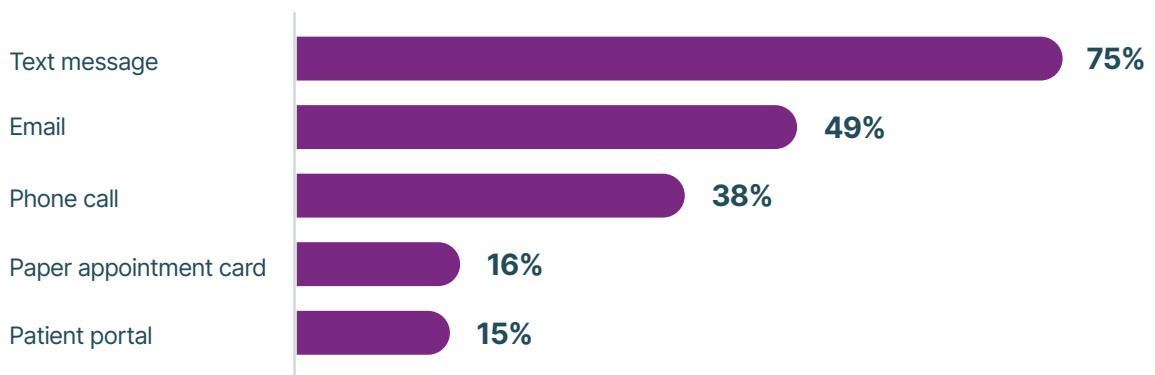
Engagement

Gen Z may be the most tech-savvy generation, but that doesn't mean older patients aren't interested in using technology to communicate. In fact, most of them enjoy it—and they want more ways to do so.

Among Phreesia-surveyed patients age 65 and older, 75% said they enjoy using digital messaging— like emails, text messages and online portals—to communicate with their providers, and 34% said the ability to do so is a "must-have" when choosing a doctor. In fact, digital messaging is the most-preferred channel for some healthcare services, with 75% of older patients saying they prefer to receive appointment reminders via text message.

How would you like to receive your appointment reminders? Please check all that apply.

Among patients age 65+ who want to receive appointment reminders (n=525)

Text message	75%
Email	49%
Phone call	38%
Paper appointment card	16%
Patient portal	15%

But the desire for digital engagement extends beyond patient intake. COVID-19 proved the power of telehealth, with older adults shifting in droves toward virtual medical visits in early 2020.[16] And according to Phreesia's survey, the demand for remote care hasn't abated: Nearly two-thirds (61%) of patients age 65 and older said they prefer to see doctors who offer both in-person and virtual visits, and about one-quarter (26%) plan to schedule a virtual visit in the next 12 months.

Building an age-inclusive digital strategy

The pandemic ushered in a surge of technology investments across every industry—and in healthcare, it hasn't slowed down. More than half of hospitals are ramping up their investments in digital solutions, citing customer experience and operational efficiencies as their top priorities.[17]

Patients today are digitally savvy, regardless of their age—and daily exposure to technology has made older adults more comfortable using it. In fact, the vast majority of Phreesia-surveyed patients age 65 and older (72%) said they're comfortable using technology to manage their healthcare needs—including 37% who said they're "very" or "extremely" comfortable doing so.

Even so, responding to older adults' changing behaviors requires a culture shift throughout an organization, one that puts patients at the center of care and prioritizes their needs and preferences in every decision.

> ***The good news?*** *There are proven, effective ways for healthcare organizations to align with older adults' digital preferences and deliver the streamlined, convenient experience they expect.*

📅 Make appointment scheduling easier

A Commonwealth Fund report found that older adults often have difficulty getting after-hours care without visiting an emergency department.[18] As people age, they may need to see their providers more frequently. But without a convenient way to request a visit or browse available appointment times, older patients may overutilize unnecessary emergency services—or worse, forgo the care they need.

That's where technology comes into play. Digital solutions like self-scheduling, online appointment requests and automated schedule management enable older adults to book and receive care at times and locations that work best for them.

These automated self-service tools help provider organizations improve throughput, too. Allowing patients to schedule and check in for their visits online can shorten wait times, minimize open appointment slots and reduce overall costs. And when front-office staff aren't burdened with manual intake responsibilities, they have more time to focus on delivering the timely, high-touch care that older adults expect.

Activate older adults in their care

Patients over age 65 are at higher risk for complex health problems that need routine monitoring or intervention. But according to one study, nearly 1 in 4 older adults avoid seeking medical care.[19] The reason? In many cases, older adults feel awkward or uncomfortable discussing their health concerns with their provider.[20]

Technology can help providers activate older patients by proactively addressing the health risks and concerns most common to their age group. Higher medication adherence, better health outcomes and lower care-coordination costs are all indicators of activated patients. And when patients are actively engaged in managing their health, their providers can more easily give them the comprehensive, supportive care they expect.

To create the most effective patient-activation strategy for your organization, consider these tips:

✔ **Send automated appointment reminders** to engage with older adults before their visit and prevent no-shows

✔ **Implement two-way text messaging** to directly contact older patients about their upcoming virtual or in-person visit

✔ **Encourage real-time feedback** by sending post-visit surveys via text message or email and prompting patients to share a review online

💲 Invest in older adults' financial experience

For many older patients, the biggest barrier to accessing care is cost.

While Medicare offers several financial protections to seniors, the program's steep cost-sharing requirements leave many older adults exposed to high deductibles and significant out-of-pocket expenses. A Commonwealth Fund report found that 1 in 12 older adults have postponed or skipped care because of cost concerns,[21] and a recent Edward Jones survey found that both retirees' and pre-retirees' greatest financial worry in retirement is the cost of care.[22]

> To mitigate that problem, providers need to offer older patients flexible ways to pay their medical bills.

Digital tools like online payments and automated payment plans help all patients better manage their finances, including those on fixed incomes or with high-deductible insurance plans.

Implementing digital payment solutions can help providers increase revenue and reduce overall billing costs. They also encourage older patients to pay their copays and deductibles at the time of service, helping healthcare organizations increase collections at the point of care.

Conclusion

Technology has changed the way healthcare is delivered—and patients of all ages are championing that change. Contrary to popular belief, older patients aren't all that different from their younger counterparts. They're flexible and forward-thinking, and they aren't afraid to try new things. By leaning into that shift and embracing convenient, easy-to-use digital tools, healthcare providers can respond more quickly to older adults' needs, improve their health outcomes and better engage them in their care.

Phreesia's digital tools help healthcare organizations deliver a modern, convenient experience for patients of all ages.

Learn more at phreesia.com

About Phreesia

Phreesia's software gives healthcare organizations a suite of applications to manage the patient intake process. Our innovative platform engages patients in their care and provides a modern, convenient experience, while enabling our clients to maximize profitability, optimize their staffing and enhance clinical care.

End notes

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