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Effective Messaging Toolkit for GP Practices

MARCH 2025

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01. What this Toolkit Does

This toolkit helps GP practices:

Reduce Missed Appointments (DNAs)



Lower Phone Calls

Freeing staff for complex tasks and
digitally excluded patients



Improve Patient Satisfaction

Offering quick, clear updates



Use Text Messaging, the NHS App,
and other digital tools effectively



Keep Messaging Costs Low

By managing message length and
choosing the best channel



02. Ways to Communicate

The Basics

One-way messaging

Ideal for appointment reminders or quick notifications. Patients cannot reply, so always include instructions if they need to cancel or ask questions elsewhere.

Two-way messaging

Lets patients respond, saving phone calls. Remember to check your inbox often to catch replies or failed messages.

Batch messaging

Sends the same text to a group of patients. Always verify you're contacting the right recipients (for example, only those eligible for a flu vaccine).

Self-book messaging

Sends a text message to the patient with a direct link for the appointment they need to book in to.

02. Ways to Communicate

The Basics (CONT.)

Here is a table showing different channels for patient communication. It explains when each one is best and when it may not work as well.

Channel	When It's Best	When it May Not Work Well	Notes
Text Message (including NHS App)	Sharing forms, attachments, or questionnaires "Reply YES/NO" confirmations Direct booking links for patients Quick updates (e.g. appointment reminder) Test results Patients cancelling appointments Works best if patients have the NHS App and notifications enabled to avoid SMS fees	Very long or detailed messages (multiple SMS fragments can be more expensive) Sensitive data that requires strict privacy Areas with poor mobile signal Urgent issues if patients don't check messages or the NHS App frequently	High Open Rate: Texts are often read quickly. Keep messages under 160 characters to avoid extra costs. Cost Savings: If the patient has the NHS App installed and notifications on, they receive a free push notification instead of a paid SMS. Fallback to SMS: For some suppliers, if the NHS App push notification isn't opened within a defined timescale, it automatically sends a text message. For other suppliers you can see which patients have notifications switched on and when a message has been read via NHS App. Notification Settings: Can take up to 24 hours to fully update. Encourages self-service (e.g. booking links, LTC reviews).

02. Ways to Communicate

The Basics (CONT.)

Channel	When It's Best	When it May Not Work Well	Notes
Email	Longer or more detailed updates (e.g. newsletters) Non-urgent messages (e.g. referrals or insurance info) General non-urgent Long-Term Condition (LTC) queries	Acute or time-sensitive issues Quick appointment prompts (text is usually faster) Many people ignore or delay reading emails	No per-email cost Good for including links or attachments Some patients prefer email, but others may overlook it if they receive too many messages
Phone Calls	Urgent or sensitive issues Contacting digitally excluded patients Abnormal test results or more complex clinical matters Last minute practice appointment cancellations (e.g. clinician illness)	Routine reminders (texts are quicker and free up phone lines) Simple or brief updates (unnecessary calls can overload staff) Patient appointment cancellations (practices may prefer using text or the NHS App for efficiency)	Personal and immediate More staff time than a text Good for complex or emotional topics Effective care navigation process needed
Practice Website	Announcements (e.g. holiday hours or closures) Explaining policies and practice processes or publishing PPG minutes Forms and FAQ pages and service disruptions.	Personal or urgent messages If there is no dedicated team member to update the website regularly	Public facing Excellent for detailed or long-term info (e.g. opening times, policies) Always encourage patients to check the site by linking to it in other communications

02. Ways to Communicate

The Basics (CONT.)

Channel	When It’s Best	When it May Not Work Well	Notes
Social Media	Broadcasting general practice updates (e.g. new clinic hours) Sharing health campaigns or service disruptions Posting regular news about the team or practice events	Private or sensitive information Complex back-and-forth that requires secure messaging	Fast, wide reach Not private or secure Use it to direct people to your website and the NHS App. Have a clear social media policy and moderate comments as needed



03. When and How to Send Messages

Below is a table for common communication scenarios. It shows **best methods** and **practical tips**.

Here is an [Example Appointment Policy](#) that should describe how to contact patients in difference circumstances.

Scenario	Best Channel(s)	Why it Helps	Best Practice Tips
Appointment Reminders	Text Message/ NHS App	Reduces DNAs (did not attends). Allows quick confirmations or cancellations to free up slots for others.	Send reminders 24–72 hours before the appointment. Include simple instructions on how to cancel via the NHS App or a text “Reply NO to cancel.” Keep reminders under 160 characters to avoid higher SMS costs. Encourage patients to use the NHS App, enabling zero cost for messages. Avoid multiple reminders that could lead to patient disengagement.
Test Results	Text Message/ NHS App	Offers quick reassurance for normal (“all clear”) results. Reduces inbound calls and admin workload. Patients learn to check the NHS App for more details.	For normal results: Keep it brief, e.g. “Your xx test is normal. No further action needed. View your test results in the NHS App.” For abnormal results: Offer an appointment. Example: “Your xx test is back. We have booked a phone/ in-person appointment on DD/MM at HH:MM. If this is not convenient, please contact the practice.” Encourage patients to view and manage results via the NHS App.

03. When and How to Send Messages (CONT.)

Scenario	Best Channel(s)	Why it Helps	Best Practice Tips
Flu Campaigns	Text Message/ NHS App	Quickly shares info on who needs the vaccine and how to book. Reaches specific patient groups (e.g. over 65s, at-risk patients).	Set up flu clinic slots in advance with clear labels (e.g. "Over 65 Flu Clinic"). Target specific groups using NHS guidance, inviting them via a self-book link by text or app notification. For digitally excluded patients, use phone calls or letters. Update your website with current priority lists and timelines so patients know what to expect.
Health Campaigns	Social Media & Website	Broadcasts health advice or promotion to a wide audience quickly. Directs patients to more detailed information online.	Post on social media, then link back to the practice website for full details. Keep website info updated so that social media posts direct patients to accurate, current content.
Practice Disruptions	Social Media & Website	Provides immediate alerts to reduce confusion or panic. Ensures patients can find accurate updates as the situation changes.	For short-term issues: Post details on the website, then share the link via social media. (Any updates automatically reflect on the linked page.) For last-minute cancellations, consider calling patients personally. For long-term disruptions: Follow the practice emergency plan, regularly update the website, and share the link via text/social media so patients can stay informed.

03. When and How to Send Messages (CONT.)

Scenario	Best Channel(s)	Why it Helps	Best Practice Tips
Pre-Appointment Questionnaires (LTC Reviews)	Text Message/ NHS App	Collects important patient information upfront. Gives clinicians an overview of the patient's concerns before the appointment.	Send a short link to the form or Florey questionnaire, mentioning it's needed for their upcoming review. Keep the text under 160 characters and avoid special characters. Encourage patients to use the NHS App for a cost-free push notification.
Patient Recalls	Text Message/ NHS App	Encourages self-booking through a quick link. Saves admin time and streamlines workflows.	Send a link to the relevant clinic or recall booking system. Follow the practice's recall protocol; consider targeting patient groups who are due or overdue. Verify there are enough appointment slots available for a smooth booking experience
Holiday Opening Hours	Social Media & Website	Helps patients plan visits around holiday schedules. Reduces confusion about when the practice is open.	Post updates on social media 1–2 weeks in advance (or earlier) and link to full details on the practice website. For a concise reminder, use text or an NHS App notification (if set up). Include steps to take if the practice is closed (e.g. instructions for urgent care or 111).



04. Keeping Costs Down

Texts Over 160 Characters Cost More

- SMS longer than 160 characters or that contain 'special characters' split into extra "fragments," each adding around 2p.
- This small charge adds up when contacting many patients.

Encourage Patients to Sign Up for the NHS App

- Messages sent to patients using the NHS App are delivered as free, in-app notifications rather than paid SMS.
- Patients can receive updates, forms, test results, and prescription information securely within the app.
- Promoting NHS App adoption cuts costs significantly while also giving patients more control and easy access to their health information.

Shortening Your Texts

- Remove extra words or long greetings.
- Use short-link tools (e.g. TinyURL) to trim URLs.

Why it Matters

- Cutting just one fragment per text can save your practice **thousands of pounds** each year.

04. Keeping Costs Down (CONT.)

Action Steps

- Check text message reports to see if your messages often exceed 160 characters.
- Adjust templates to keep them short.
- Track cost savings after making changes.



Example: By reviewing and refining your message templates to deliver the same information in fewer characters, you can noticeably lower costs:

Your GP medical records show that you are due for your annual diabetes review with one of our clinicians, it is important you attend this review to ensure your diabetes is under control. Please contact us on 01111 111111 to speak with one of our reception staff who will be able to book your appointment.

309 characters – within 3 fragments

Your annual diabetes review is due. Book your appointment here [URL Link](#). The review is important to ensure your diabetes is well controlled.

141 characters – within 1 fragment



Fragment – Character Conversion:

1 Fragment = 160 Characters

2 Fragments = 306 Characters

3 Fragments = 459 Characters

4 Fragments = 612 Characters

05. Quick Tips for Success

- Make a list of short standard templates for common needs (e.g. normal results, appointment reminders).
- Encourage staff to pick from these to stay consistent and ensure they are regularly reviewed and kept up to date.

Appointment Booking Options

- Encourage two-way texting: "Reply NO to cancel."
- Encourage staff to send self-booking links when possible.
- Reduces phone calls, and waiting times and prompts patients to self-serve.

Segment Groups

- Only message people who need to know (e.g. for a vaccination drive, message the eligible group).

Promote Digital Tools

- Show patients how to download and use the NHS App.
- A "Digital Champion" can help patients one-to-one. Email appambassadors@nhs.net to register to become an NHS App Ambassador or sign up for external updates here: [NHS App Update](#).

06. Making Messaging Part of Daily Work

Link Messages to Patient Records



- Text message systems can save all incoming and outgoing texts into the patient's record automatically if coded correctly.
- This ensures no important information is lost or overlooked.

Team Training



- Show front-desk and clinical staff how to send and read replies through the messaging system and the NHS App.
- Ensure staff are confirming patient contact details at every opportunity.
- Schedule regular refreshers so everyone stays confident with updates or new features.
- Make sure the team have access to the messaging system support resources.

Streamline Your Process



- Consider how results, appointments, and follow-ups flow through your practice.
- A quick "active messaging" approach may shorten the chain of tasks: for example, the GP reviews results and then sends a text inviting the patient to book their own telephone or online slot, instead of tasking reception who then have to call.
- This can reduce workload and speed up care.

Gather Feedback



- Ask patients if they receive and understand texts or NHS App notifications.
- If many say they never see them, confirm you have correct phone numbers or encourage them to enable notifications in the NHS App and mobile phone settings.

07. Encouraging NHS App Use

Why It Matters:

Cost Savings

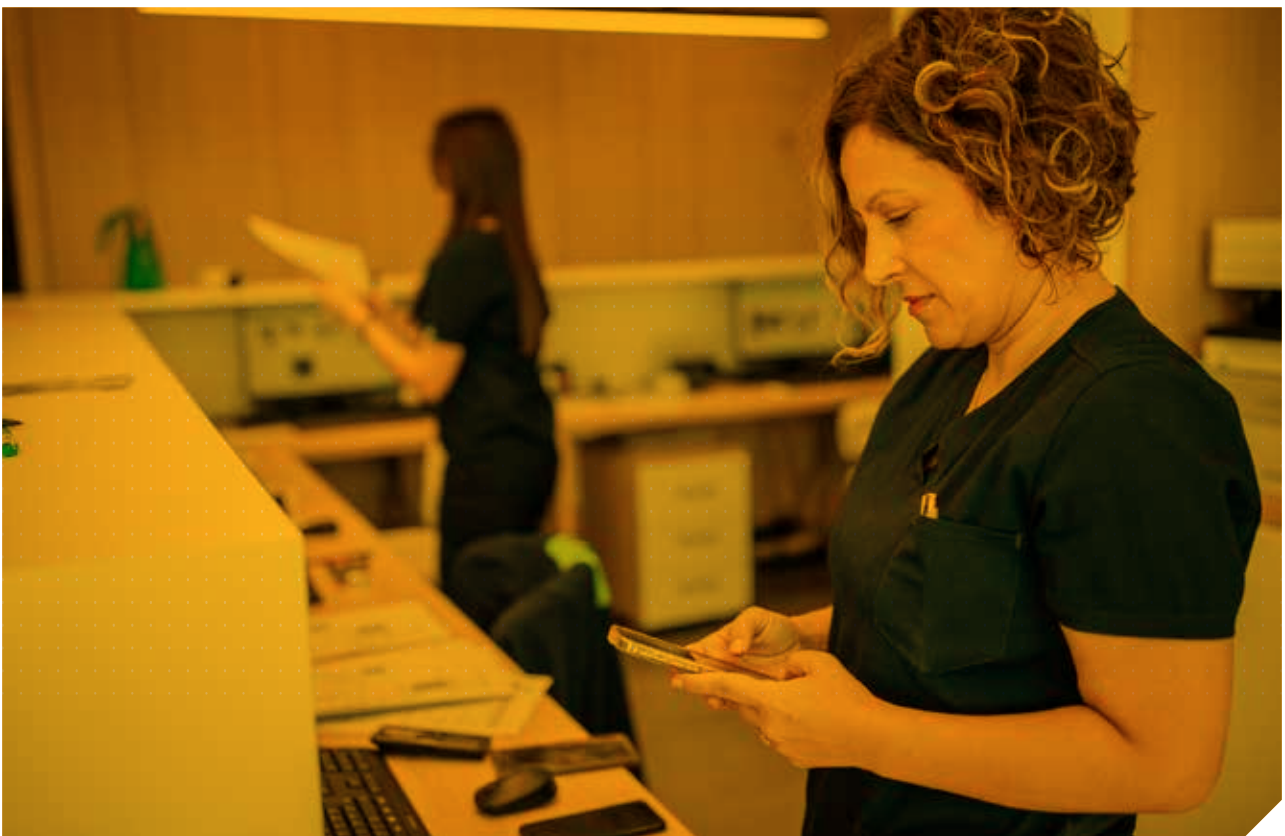
Messages sent through the NHS App are free. You avoid SMS charges entirely.

Empowers Patients

They can book appointments, check results, and order prescriptions themselves. This cuts down on calls and queue times and improves patient satisfaction.

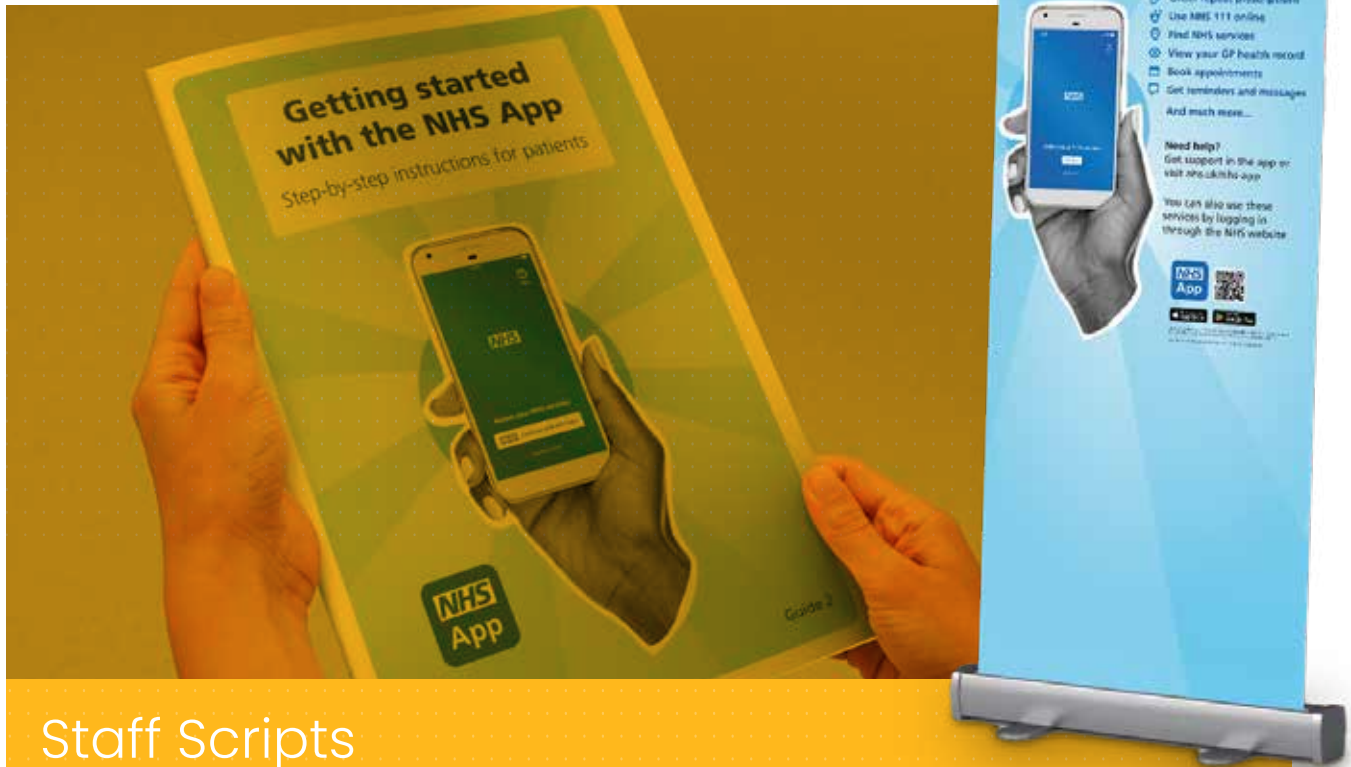
Secure Messaging

Sharing forms and private information is safer within the NHS App. This boosts patient confidence.



07. Encouraging NHS App Use (CONT.)

How to Promote It:



Staff Scripts

At reception, encourage people to sign up and help them to do it there and then if possible. If someone asks about a prescription, test results or appointment cancellation for example mention the app. Clinical staff to also promote, when taking bloods or when requesting bloods, direct patients to the NHS App for the results.

Posters, Leaflets & TV

Display simple instructions on how to download and use the app.

Website & Social Media

Show benefits and link to official NHS App pages

Digital Champions

Have a staff member or volunteer available to help patients install and learn how to use the app.

08. More Help and Support

NHS England

Email and Text Message
Communications in General Practice

Gov.uk

Reducing Costs Through
Concise Text Messages

NHS Digital

NHS App Promotion Materials

MDU

Text Message Communication in
General Practice



09. Implementation Steps for Smarter Messaging

Follow these steps to start using smarter messaging in your practice:

1. Review Current Setup

- Review your messaging process now (templates, character counts, number of messages).
- What are the most common reasons for sending texts (reminders, results, campaigns, etc.)?

2. Set Simple Goals

- For example: "Reduce DNA rate by 10% in 3 months" or "Cut text fragments for all invites by one fragment."
- Make sure goals are realistic and easy to measure.

3. Create or Update Templates

- Keep them under 160 characters with no special characters if possible.
- Add "Reply NO" options to enable two-way messaging.
- Use short URLs to save characters.
- Make sure you link to necessary information in specific templates.

4. Promote the NHS App

- Train staff to talk about the NHS App during patient interactions.
- Set up posters or a Digital Champion to assist patients.

09. Implementation Steps for Smarter Messaging (CONT.)

5. Train Your Team

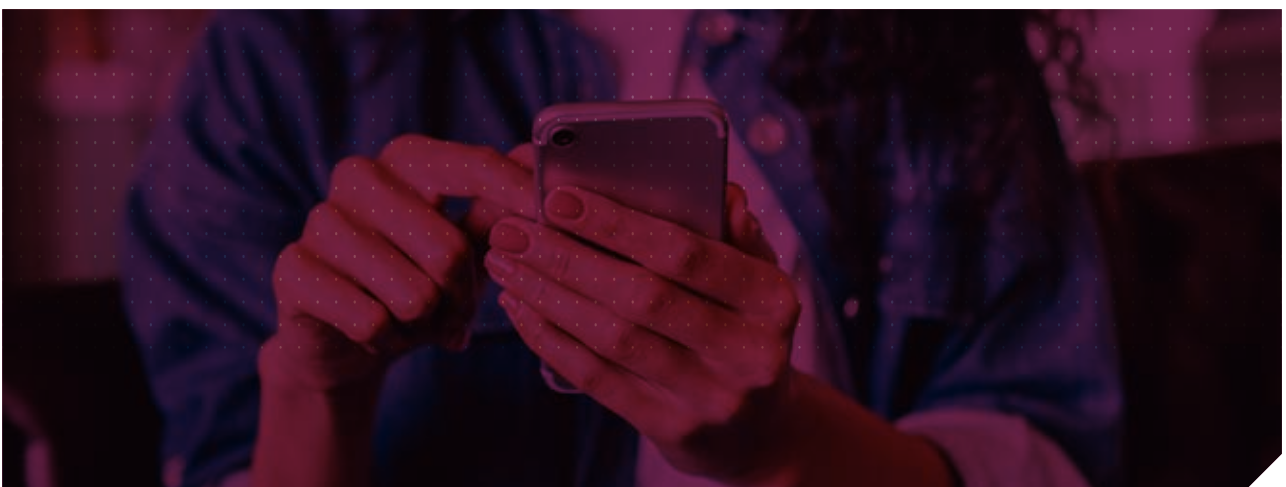
- Show all staff how to use all the features in the text message system.
- Explain the benefits of using messaging for both the practice and patients.

6. Monitor Results

- Check DNA rates, phone call volumes, and SMS fragment usage monthly as well as message templates utilised.
- See if you're meeting your goals.

7. Adjust and Improve

- If certain campaigns still use more fragments than you'd like, review them.
- If many texts fail, remove the details from the patient record and confirm correct details at the next contact.
- Share wins with your team (e.g. "We saved £X on text costs this month!").

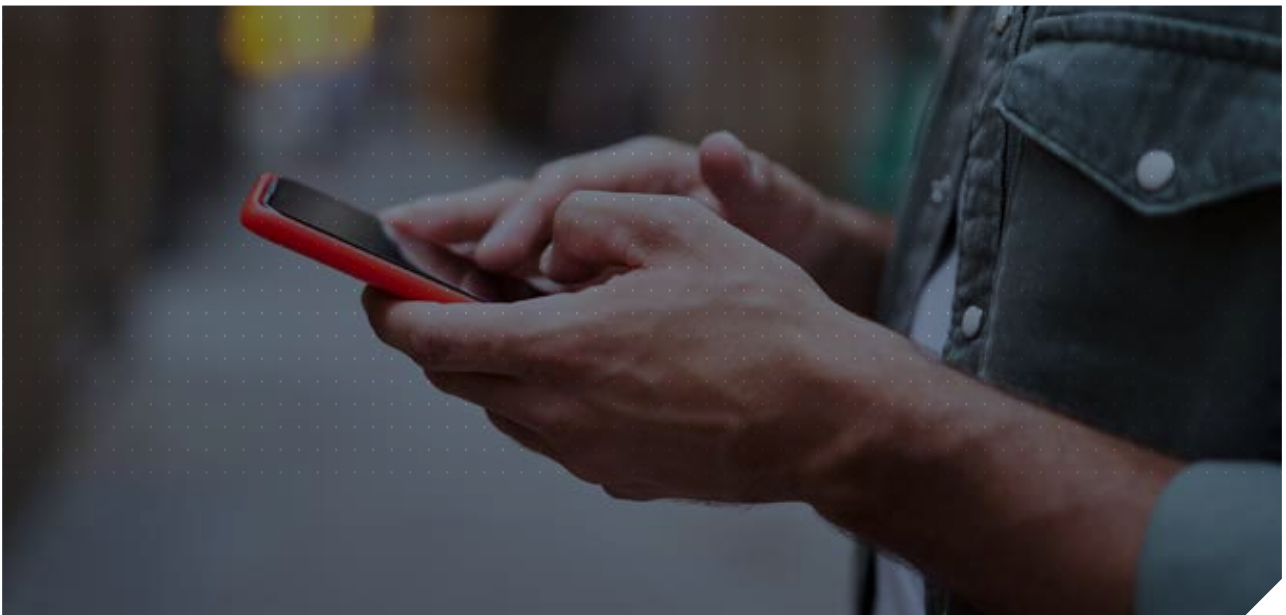


10. Summary

A clear messaging plan helps your practice:

- **Improve Care** by reducing missed appointments and making it easier for patients to book and respond.
- **Streamline Work** by cutting down on phone calls for simple updates.
- **Keep Patients Informed.** Ensure patients are consistently informed about test results, appointments, prescriptions, upcoming clinics, national health campaigns, available services, and all relevant patient-related matters through a structured and organised approach.
- **Save Money** by keeping texts short and using free NHS App messages.

Review these tips often, check your text message system reports/templates, and adjust your messaging approach as patient needs change. This is the best way to offer quick, cost-effective, and patient-friendly communication.



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