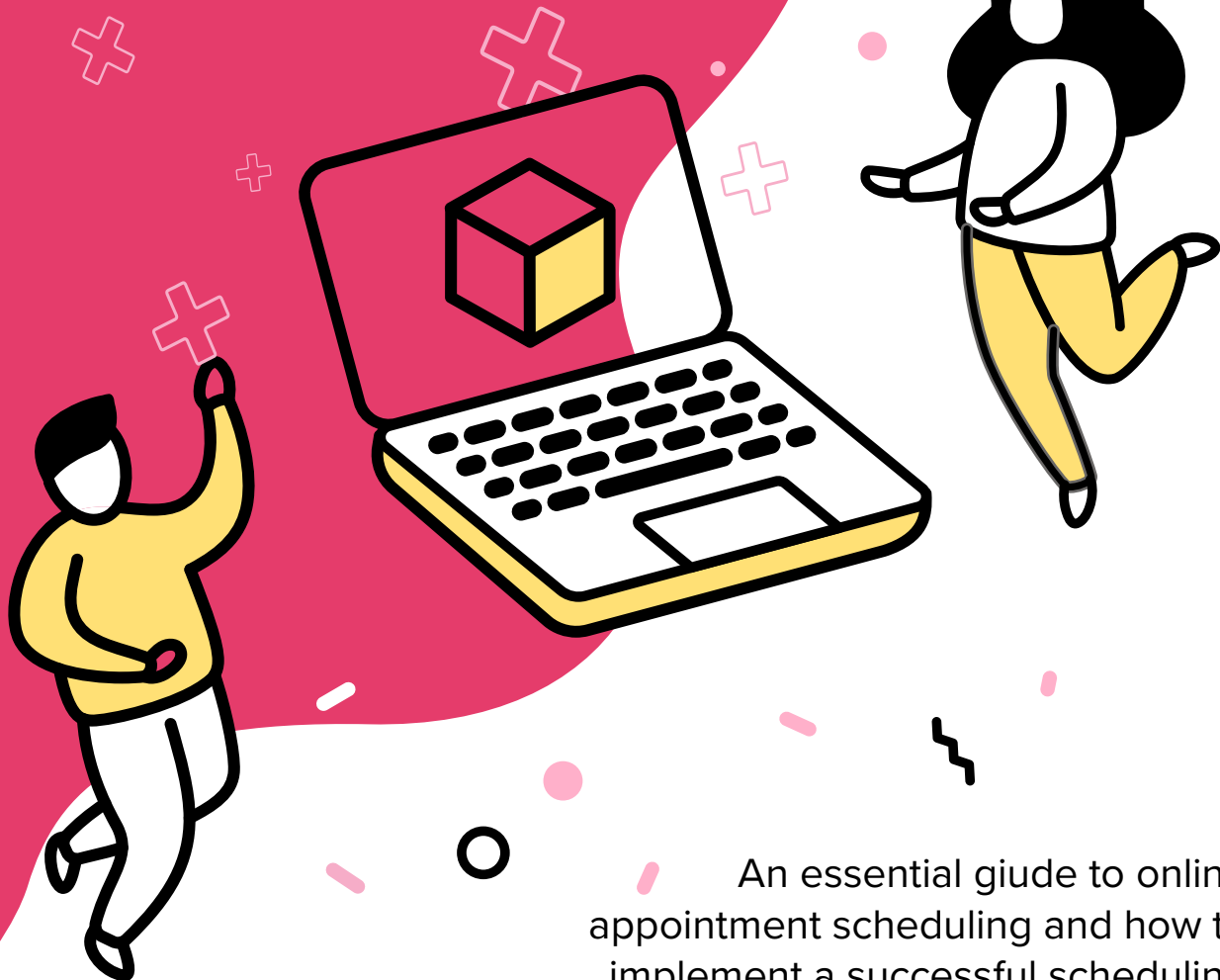


Essential Guide to Online Appointment Scheduling



An essential guide to online appointment scheduling and how to implement a successful scheduling strategy in your clinic.

Introduction

Until recently, the healthcare industry was not readily adopting digital health technology. When the coronavirus outbreak and subsequent social-distancing measures limited in-person contact, clinics had to find new ways of working.

Typically, timelines for changes in health systems were discussed in terms of years, not weeks. However, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, things moved rapidly. Health organizations across the country were forced to adopt a virtual care model, at least partially, to provide care that was safe, timely and accessible.

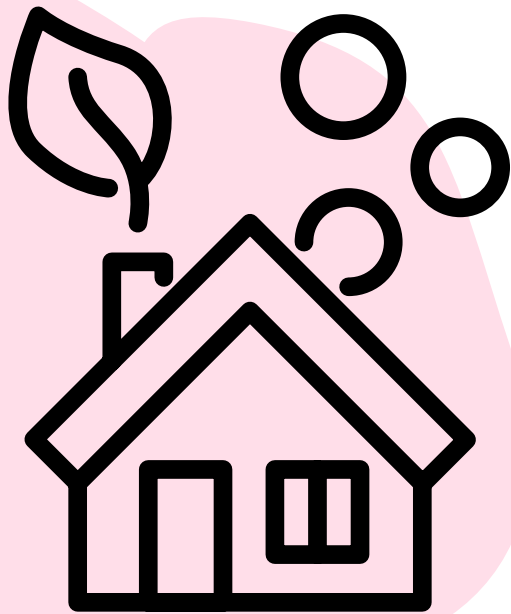
In Ontario, physicians provided 52% of care virtually, online or by phone, for patient visits, psychotherapy and consultations with other physicians in April 2020. The widespread adoption of virtual care forced a rapid system transformation and offered unprecedented ways for Canadians to access care. However, most healthcare practitioners who delivered virtual care had little to no prior experience with it.

As consumers are spending more time online, the need for modern, consumer-facing technology that is geared towards the user-experience becomes essential for modern practices. While some digital transformation has occurred, improving patient experience remains a critical concern for health organizations as they feel pressured to keep-up with patient demands for fast, convenient and frictionless digital experiences, as seen in industries such as travel, hospitality, e-commerce, and banking.

According to a survey conducted by Arcweb Technologies, the healthcare industry faces considerable challenges when it comes to improving the digital patient experience. Specifically, noting the ability to meet patient expectations, patient acquisition and the digital experience as a whole. In fact, one of the most significant concerns is in the area of online scheduling – especially for new patients where the onboarding experience is considerably longer and more complex.

Health organizations must recognize the importance of patient self-scheduling as a way to deliver the virtual care experience that not only patients want, but expect. In the near term, patient self-scheduling is a market differentiator that will help clinics stay competitive. In the long term, it will be an unwavering consumer expectation and a non-negotiable for modern practices.

80%



of people want to use their mobile phones to interact with doctors or other healthcare professionals.

Source: [FICO Global survey](#)

The Benefits

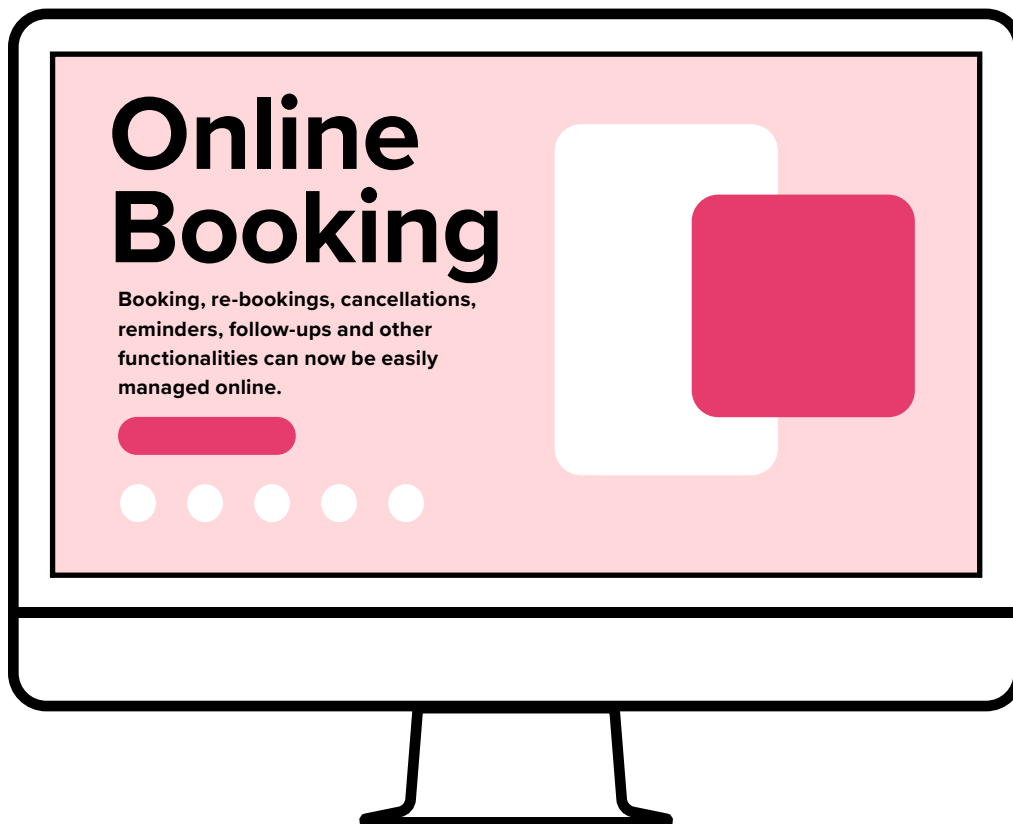


The benefits of online appointment scheduling and how it will help your clinic prosper.

What is Online Appointment Scheduling?

From making dinner reservations to shopping for groceries, consumers today use online applications for most services, and healthcare should be no different. Online appointment scheduling in healthcare is the ability for patients to schedule and manage their own healthcare appointments through an online portal, at any time of the day, without the help of staff.

Online appointment scheduling is not a new concept. It's used by many industries to manage new client requests, intake and scheduling. Although healthcare has lagged behind other industries, the trend is inevitable as consumers have been able to self-schedule services in other industries for years now. As a means of managing client interactions, streamlining workflows, improving operational efficiencies and enhancing the patient experience, a simple and secure online patient scheduler that seamlessly integrates with your EMR represents the most value for modern clinics.



The Benefits of Online Appointment Scheduling

Today, patients are looking for more than just a competent practitioner. They want someone who delivers a unique care experience, and who provides the extra conveniences that makes their life a little easier. That convenience comes in the form of digital processes and communication. Whether that be through automated appointment reminders, SMS messages, or online scheduling, patients want more of their care and booking process to be digital.

Offering online appointment scheduling benefits patients, staff and clinics. Results show that patient self-scheduling reduces no-shows, enhances revenue, improves operational efficiencies and staff productivity. Automating the booking process makes client intake faster and easier for patients and staff; thereby improving employee engagement and patient satisfaction. Read on to see how online appointment scheduling can benefit your clinic.

Enhance the Patient Experience

It takes a patient an average of ten minutes to schedule an appointment over the phone, and most of that time is spent on hold or being transferred. When you allow your patients to self-schedule their appointments, they face fewer barriers and annoyances— such as long wait times, back and forth communication with staff and lengthy descriptions of their health concerns. This can impact a patient's willingness or ability to seek care, and in many cases prolonging it until absolutely necessary.

According to a new [Ipsos survey](#), seven in ten Canadians (68%) have missed a doctor's appointment for reasons ranging from long wait times to an inability to find a doctor outside of working hours. Many Canadians (37%) say they've not gone to the doctor's office when sick because they were unable to get a timely appointment. Long wait times at walk-in clinics are the most common reason for Canadians skipping out on seeing a doctor, with one in four (42%) saying they've avoided the clinic for this reason.

Canadians want access to digital services that allow them to better manage their health. In a recent survey conducted by [Leger and Infoway](#) which surveyed 6,002 adults, 64% of Canadians had at least one virtual health encounter in 2020, 79% said they want access to their personal health information online, 77% want electronic prescription renewals, and 75% want online appointment-booking.

Online appointment booking improves the patient experience because it's faster and more convenient than traditional appointment scheduling. Patients can get frustrated with being on hold, transferred multiple times, or by not getting a response at all. Self-scheduling offers patients access to their health practitioner's schedule at any time of the day. When patients get appointments in the right place, at the right time, with the right specialist, and through the channel they choose, they feel more empowered, engaged, and satisfied with their care experience.

Reduce No-Shows and Fill Cancellations

Self-scheduling gives patients the power to book appointments at their convenience which helps build loyalty, boost satisfaction and reduce no-shows. Every time a patient doesn't show-up or reschedules an appointment, a health clinic will lose money. No-shows eat health clinics' revenue because if a patient can no longer attend an appointment and can't notify staff in advance the time slot will go unused.

When schedules are available online, patients can easily book last-minute cancellations which prevents lost revenue for the clinic. Research shows that patients who book their own appointments are more likely to show-up and achieve their unique health goals. When a patient schedules their own appointment, they feel like they're in control which significantly impacts patient engagement. Engaged patients are more likely to attend their appointments and notify in advance of cancellations. Automatic email reminders provide an opportunity to notify patients of appointments and allow them to cancel or reschedule within a set time frame, further reducing the risk of no-shows and cancellations.

Improve Operational Efficiencies

On average it takes staff 5 minutes to book an appointment manually over the phone. That may not seem like a lot but with cancellations, re-bookings and appointment reminders, it becomes a significant expense for clinics. Patient self-scheduling improves operational efficiencies by saving staff time and reducing call volumes during peak seasons.

Fewer incoming calls, less manual appointments, and fewer scheduling errors means staff have more time to focus on revenue-generating activities like patient referrals, follow-ups, and delivering high-quality in-office patient experiences. Automating the appointment booking process takes the administration burden off clinical teams, improves outcomes for patients, and produces notable cost-savings for clinicians. Clinics can maintain full control over the booking process by restricting booking options to certain times of the day, individual practitioner's preferences and schedules, or by different types of appointments.

Reduce Barriers to Accessing Care

In addition to meeting consumer expectations, online appointment scheduling helps health teams overcome many new and existing challenges patients face when accessing care. For example, if a person works long or irregular hours, has inadequate transportation, language barriers, a disability, or if there are cultural and socioeconomic factors that inhibit them from getting the care they need. While patient self-scheduling can't solve every issue, it does address some of the common barriers that may inhibit someone from booking an appointment.

The alternative to traditional doctor's appointments and walk-in clinics is seeing a doctor in real time, online, with little waiting involved and with the convenience of staying at home and scheduling the appointment at the most convenient time for the patient.

For instance, in Ontario, interest in such a service is high. Half of Ontarians (49%) say they'd be interested in seeing a live licensed Ontario-based doctor online, to have their symptoms diagnosed and receive a prescription. Millennials (47%) are the most likely to adopt technological health management aids, while Boomers (26%) are less likely to use tech in this area of their lives, according to an [Ipsos Survey](#).

Attract and Retain New Patients

The ability for health clinics to gain the attention of and subsequently onboard new patients will become a key differentiator within the market. Online self-scheduling systems that were implemented during the pandemic will become a permanent feature of health clinics in the future.

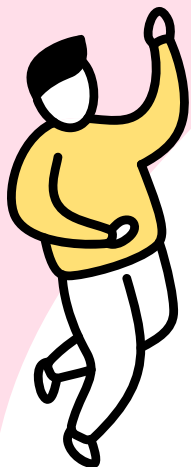
Patients are becoming “healthcare consumers” who are demanding user-friendly online solutions from the healthcare industry. Patients are seeking practitioners who offer greater convenience and flexibility than ever before. According to the results of Deloitte’s 2019 global [healthcare consumer survey](#), there is a greater interest in and use of virtual care as more consumers appear to be warming up to the idea of virtual health. More than half of respondents who have seen a healthcare provider virtually report being satisfied and would likely have another virtual visit.

In another [survey](#), nearly 90% of Canadians said that they want access to digital health technologies—believing it leads to better care. Only a small percentage are actually taking advantage of tools. Canadians want access to digital services that allow them to better manage their health and it’s clear there is a growing demand for and the use of digital health services.

Online appointment scheduling is a key differentiator among competition. For maximum effectiveness, health clinics need to look beyond one-sided appointment request forms to creating personalized experiences that engage patients throughout their healthcare journey. A patient’s scheduling experience matters. Clinics that want to attract and retain new patients must ensure patients are satisfied with their scheduling experience.

Best Practices

The best practices for successfully using online patient scheduling in your clinic.



Best Practices for Using Online Patient Scheduling

If you're ready to implement a self-scheduling strategy for your clinic, you're on the right path. Follow these best practices for maximum effectiveness:

Use Appointment Scheduling Software

The ability for health organizations to gain the attention of and subsequently onboard new patients will become a key differentiator within the market. It's crucial that modern clinics allow patients to schedule their appointments through a user-friendly, online portal which allows patients to make appointments when it's convenient for them. Clinics that implement patient self-scheduling will free up administrative staff, streamline the scheduling process, enhance revenues and improve patient satisfaction.

Using an online appointment scheduling system, such as EMPOWER Health, will save hundreds of hours per staff member by automating every step of the booking process, including notifications, reminders, cancellations, scheduling of follow-up appointments, rescheduling appointments, and more.

Automate Your Waitlist

Automated patient waitlists offer the convenience of online appointment booking any hour of day and from any device, unlike your physical staff. Automated waitlists benefit patients and staff as it makes the booking process much faster and simpler. Using a waitlist feature coupled with online appointment booking, helps fill last-minute cancellations, reduce no-shows and keep schedules full and regulated at any time of day— without staff intervention.

Waitlists and email communications are vital when managing expectations of potential clients. EMPOWER Health's waitlist management system allows clinics to fill schedules automatically, notifies patients with email and text reminders and automatically updates the information in your electronic medical record (EMR) or practice management system (PMS) with two-way integration. Clinics can maintain waitlists based on the service offering or practitioner, and automatically notify patients when a slot becomes available.

Use Automated Reminders and Messages

Missed appointments result in lost revenue. Clinics can mitigate the risk of missed appointments with automated appointment reminders and messages. Appointment reminders automate email and SMS messages, automatically notifies patients of upcoming appointments, and automatically updates your EMR or PMS. Patients get notified in advance which easily allows them to cancel or reschedule within a set time frame, reducing no-shows. In fact, it's more likely that patients will attend more appointments and notify you in advance if they have to cancel or reschedule when they schedule their own appointments.

If a patient does miss an appointment, the system will automatically send a message prompting the individual to rebook. If an unforeseen circumstance will impact your scheduled appointments, you can broadcast a message to a group of patients, saving your staff several hours on the phone notifying each individual. Clinics have the flexibility to create different messages depending on the type of appointment and include forms or important updates.

For example, for vaccination appointments, consent forms can be filled out online by patients before their appointment. Any last minute changes to where or how a patient attends their appointment can be easily sent beforehand. After an appointment, staff can send post-appointment follow-up communications like thank-you emails, feedback surveys or any supporting documentation, all with a click of a button.

An automated appointment reminder system benefits your patients, staff and clinic. It allows patients to easily cancel or schedule appointments reducing no-shows and last-minute cancellations and allows you to automate reminders and broadcast messages.

Enroll in Telehealth Services

The demand for “virtual visits” or telehealth options has skyrocketed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Incorporating telehealth options is essential to retaining and attracting clients and should be a top priority in your digital health strategy.

A global [FICO study](#) found that around 80% of people want to use their mobile phones to interact with doctors and other healthcare professionals. To meet consumers’ needs, health clinics should provide high-quality care through easy-to-use platforms that protect the privacy and security of personal health information.

When thinking about virtual visits, healthcare professionals should choose an app that’s convenient and PHIPA and HIPPA compliant, like [Teledoc](#) or [Maple Health](#). Incorporate a single sign-on for patient services in your digital health strategy for an even greater impact. A health information exchange service allows professionals to access real time consent to health information, onboard new patients more efficiently, and quickly and securely deliver protected health information across jurisdictions, between patients, and other healthcare professionals.

For appointment management, it’s important your virtual visits be booked through the same digital service provider as your in-person appointments. Driving patients to an entirely new platform creates two digital personas and multiple schedules to manage.

Enhance with EMR Integration

When choosing an online scheduling tool, it’s important to select one that integrates with your EMR and PMS. This allows staff to make updates in one place, ensures schedules are always current and up-to-date and prevents double-booking.

There are a myriad of online scheduling solutions available, but many of them are not designed for healthcare professionals and don’t take specific patient workflows into consideration, or integrate with EMR systems. Some practices have adopted non-medical booking systems that are very low cost or free to find that they create more work as the admin staff have to manage two calendars and manually enter data from one system to another.

A simple and secure patient self-scheduling software, like [EMPOWER Health](#), integrates with OSCAR, Telus Practice Solutions, and Accuro (or Kroll for Pharmacies). Connections to your EMR save work duplicating contacts, schedules, and appointments and allows your team to work in the tool they already use to manage appointments.

If you do offer telehealth services, your virtual visit solution will likely have a built-in booking feature, but it may not integrate with your existing EMR. A third-party application such as EMPOWER Health, will consolidate multiple digital tools into one, making health teams more effective and efficient.

Keep Your Digital Front Door Familiar

One overlooked aspect when selecting an appointment booking system is whether to choose one that is offered by your EMR vendor. There are some advantages, such as tighter / more seamless integration– but also some downsides.

If you ever have to change your EMR or move to a major version change or upgrade, you may also have to change the booking system along with it. If you move from one EMR vendor to another, you'll have to re-set up the booking system online, and have to retrain your patients on how to use your booking system. Having a 3rd party online booking system that integrates into multiple EMRs provides some future proofing and gives you more flexibility and control over what backend systems you use to manage your practice.

Also as our health services become more integrated with other health care providers, for example the expanding concept of Ontario Health Teams and Family Health Teams in Ontario, there are going to be more opportunities for your patients to book appointments at other providers' sites. By teams sharing a common digital front door that works with multiple EMR systems in the background, patients can use a common identity to access services at multiple providers, improving their experience and access to care.

Conclusion



The future of health is here. People want seamless and satisfying digital health experiences.

Start Implementing Better Patient Scheduling Today

In healthcare, technology has not kept up with consumer expectations. Patients have not yet experienced frictionless digital experiences found in other industries like travel and e-commerce. Complexity, privacy concerns, siloed systems and lags in technology have contributed to a delay in the industry's implementation of digital technology.

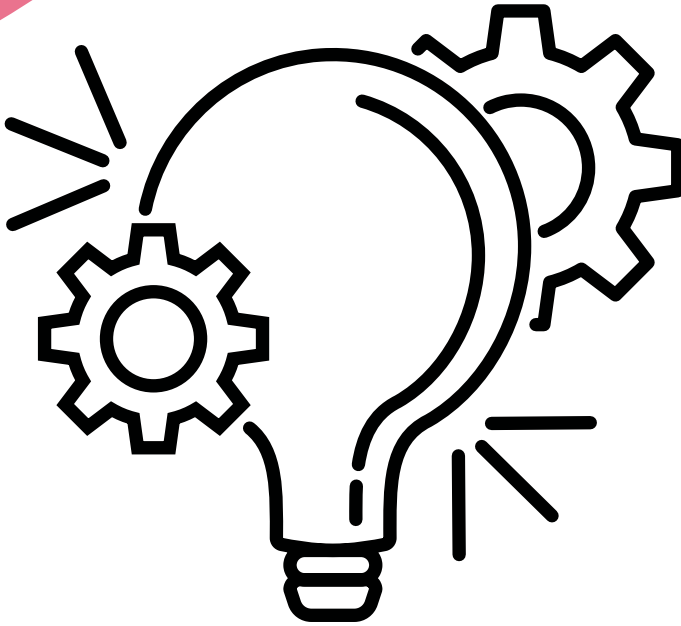
When it comes to healthcare decisions, patients value convenience and access above health insurance and even quality of care. In fact, according to [NCR Health](#), 80% of patients reported that they would switch providers for “convenience factors” alone. Health clinics must focus on creating seamless and satisfying user experiences. One of the easiest and most valuable ways for clinics to offer greater convenience is through timely appointment access.

With an online appointment scheduling system, patients have full transparency and access into your schedule and can make an appointment for when it's convenient for them— without having to wait until business hours or staff intervention. Online appointment scheduling can be a differentiator that can help clinics attract new patients, improve operational efficiencies and remain competitive. As health systems continue to evolve and improve the patient experience, online appointment scheduling is a clear opportunity to meet consumer demand and help your clinic prosper.

Online Appointment Scheduling with EMPOWER Health

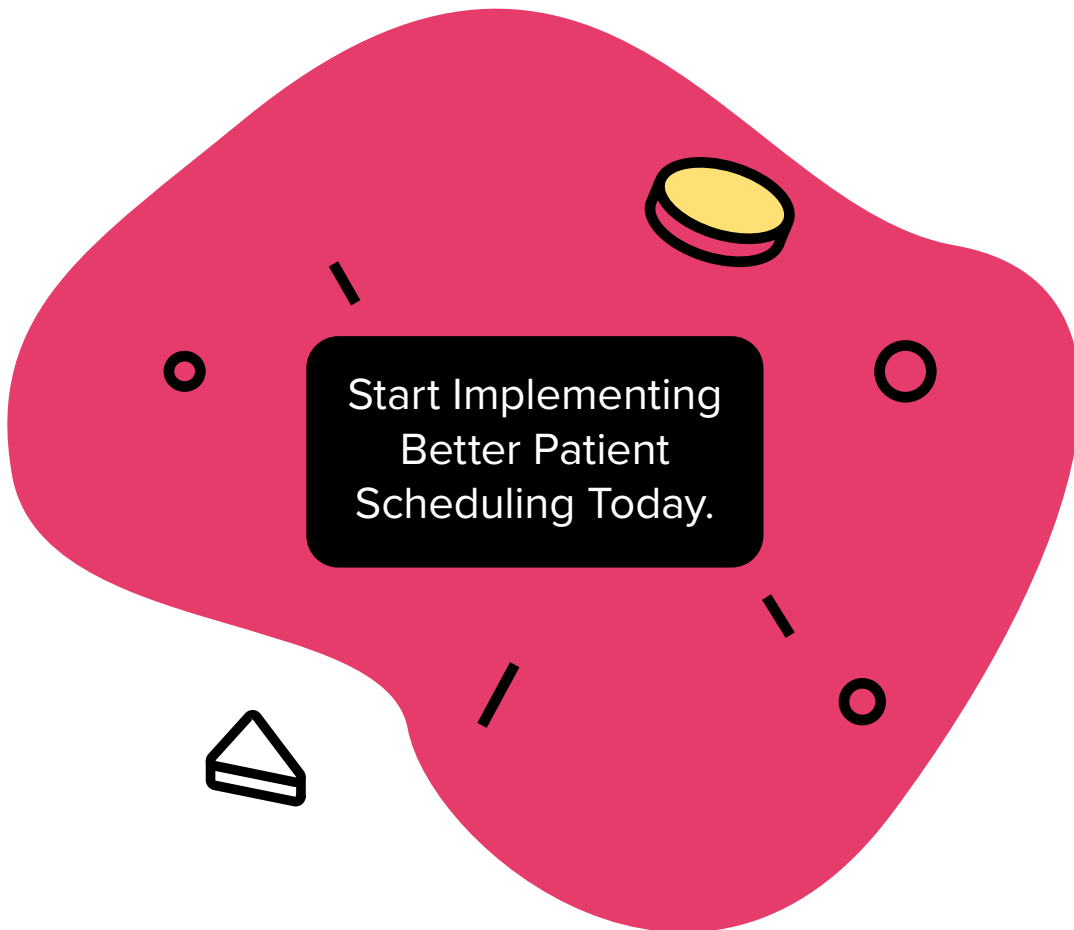
EMPOWER Health is a personalized online appointment scheduling solution that makes managing online appointments easy. With EMPOWER Health's simplified setup and easy-to-implement website plug-ins, you can implement online booking quickly and easily. Designed for Canadian pharmacies, clinics and large healthcare organizations, the EMPOWER Health team is ready to co-design a solution that aligns with your organization and fits your unique workflow.

Visit empower.ca to learn more about how EMPOWER Health's online patient scheduling software can help your organization deliver an optimal patient experience, improve staff efficiency and reduce revenue loss in your clinic.



Case Study: A Preventive Health Executive Practice Streamlines Workflows and Improves Efficiencies with Online Scheduling

A preventive health executive practice that conducts comprehensive health checks was looking for a solution to improve their appointment setting process. The challenge was to find an appointment management system that was flexible and customizable to meet the needs of their unique appointment structures. Typically, when a client books a health check, they have multiple appointments in a day with several practices and practitioners. This requires the staff to manually book multiple appointments for one individual. For example, that person may first go for blood work, followed by an ultrasound, then a stress test. The clinic was looking for a solution that would help make scheduling these comprehensive health checks easier and simpler for the staff. By using EMPOWER Health's patient scheduling software, they can book multiple services as a bundle. The staff save time manually booking individual appointments internally, thereby improving efficiency and boosting productivity.



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