

# Closing the intention gap:

How to get patients the preventive care they need



## Executive summary

As healthcare organizations shore up their population health strategies, preventive care measures are taking center stage. Nearly half of Americans<sup>1</sup> have at least one chronic illness, and that number is projected to keep growing.<sup>2</sup> Conditions like heart disease, cancer and diabetes—often preventable through healthy lifestyle habits and regular provider visits—are responsible for 7 out of 10 deaths in the U.S. every year. In addition to their negative impact on health outcomes and quality of life, chronic illnesses drive a significant share of national healthcare costs: Total direct U.S. expenditures for chronic-disease treatment exceeded \$1 trillion in 2016 alone.<sup>3</sup>

But despite ongoing reminders from providers and government agencies about the importance of proactively managing one's health, Americans use preventive care services at just half the recommended rate.<sup>4</sup> And when patients don't get the preventive care they need, their risks for avoidable illnesses and premature mortality goes up<sup>5</sup>—as does the cost of their care. With missed prevention opportunities costing the U.S. an estimated \$55 billion<sup>6</sup> per year, the onus is on healthcare organizations to provide the right services to the right patients at the right time.

**Here's the good news:** In the face of these challenges, there are proven, effective strategies to boost patients' use of preventive care services. By effectively leveraging technology and automation, healthcare organizations can close the "intention gap" between the services patients know they should seek and their self-care decisions to deliver the proactive, personalized care they need.

### In this white paper, we'll explore:

- ✔ The most common reasons why patients don't prioritize preventive care
- ✔ How to educate patients about which preventive services are relevant to them
- ✔ Ways technology can help healthcare organizations improve visit rates and bridge generational gaps

## About this white paper

This white paper draws on results from a January 2022 Phreesia survey of patients who checked in for their doctors' appointments using the Phreesia platform. Of the 12,823 patients who completed the survey, 67% were age 64 or younger, and 61% had commercial insurance. Our goal is to shed light on patients' experiences with preventive care screening and to share best practices for connecting patients to the preventive services they need.

## High awareness, low utilization

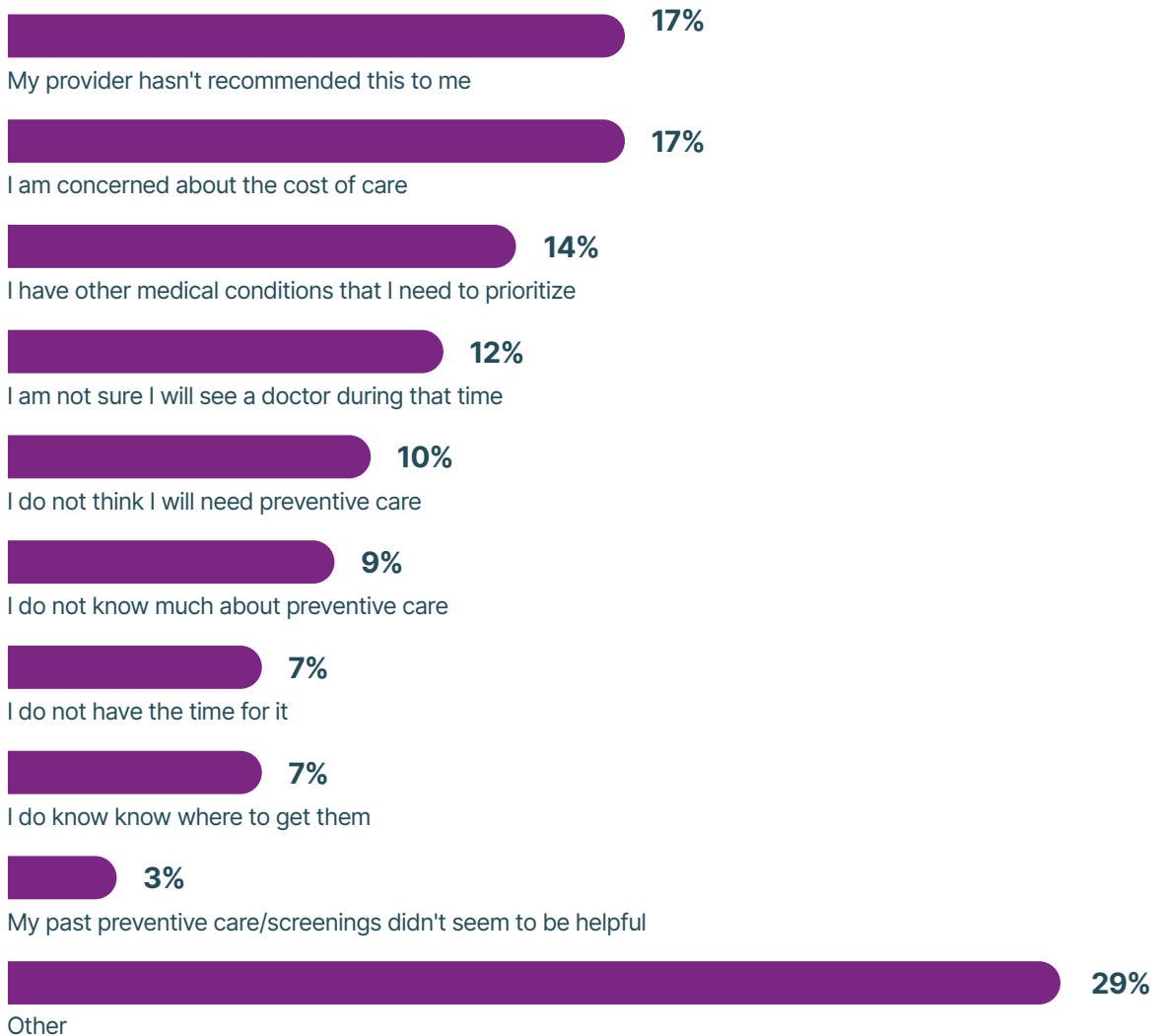
Most patients recognize the value of preventive care. In Phreesia's survey, virtually all patients (99%) said they feel preventive care is important to managing their health, including 89% who believe it is "very important." Yet more than 1 in 6 (17%) said they do not plan to receive any preventive care services in the next year.

Here are some of the most common reasons that patients underutilize preventive services, according to Phreesia-surveyed patients who said they are unlikely to get preventive care in the next 12 months:



### Why are you unlikely to get preventive care in the next 12 months? Please check all that apply.

Among patients who are unlikely to get preventive care (n=2,609)







## Cost concerns

Under the Affordable Care Act, most health plans are required to cover eligible preventive services—like immunizations and screening tests—at no cost to patients.<sup>7</sup> But according to Phreesia's survey, less than half of patients (48%) know that preventive care is fully covered by their insurance. With out-of-pocket healthcare expenses rising<sup>8</sup> fast, patients may forgo seeking care if they don't think they can afford it.

Running eligibility and benefits checks before preventive care appointments can help providers reassure patients that they won't owe anything for their visit. It's equally important to educate patients about their financial responsibilities in clear, simple language—and to provide a cost estimate, when possible, for any services that may require a copay, deductible or coinsurance.



## Lack of guidance

Patients' care-seeking behaviors often are shaped by their doctors. In fact, 62% of Phreesia-surveyed patients said they rely on their provider to learn about preventive care services—more than any other resource tested in the survey, including internet searches, websites and emails from insurance companies.

*But if providers forget to recommend preventive care, patients are unlikely to pursue it—or they may falsely assume they don't need it.*

And even if patients recognize the importance of preventive services, they may elect to prioritize other medical conditions instead, as did 14% of Phreesia-surveyed patients who said they are unlikely to get preventive care in the next year. Targeted digital outreach can help providers inform patients about preventive care during intake or post-visit follow-up, ensuring that each patient understands which services best align with their unique health needs.



## Time constraints

Sometimes, patients are too busy to focus on their health, or they may not see a medical need as urgent. But in many cases, they simply don't understand when they should schedule preventive care. In Phreesia's survey, 39% of patients said that having more information about when they need preventive care would help them better access it.

With research indicating that 100,000 deaths could be averted every year<sup>9</sup> in the U.S. by improving the delivery of just five preventive services—colorectal and breast-cancer screenings, flu vaccines, counseling on smoking cessation and regular aspirin use for heart disease—it's imperative that providers make it easier for patients to stay on top of their care. Automated tools like self-scheduling can help patients schedule a visit at any time and ensure the provision of care takes place when it's most convenient for them.

## Access questions

Primary care practices typically offer some preventive services in-house, including wellness visits, blood pressure monitoring, cholesterol tests and routine screenings. But for many patients, that's not common knowledge. According to Phreesia's survey, 1 in 5 patients (20%) said that having more information about where to schedule preventive care would help them better access it. To meet that need, providers should employ technology during intake to educate patients about their practice's on-site preventive services—and send customized reminder messages that encourage patients to book a preventive care appointment.

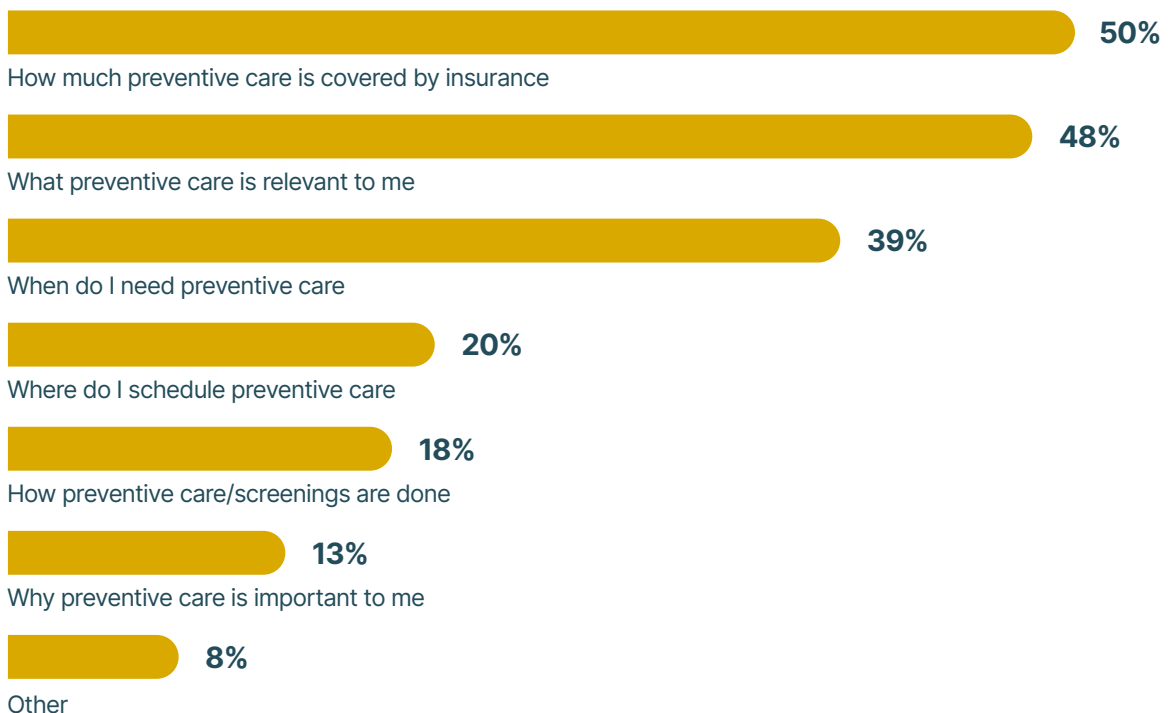
## Unclear benefits

Here's a sobering statistic: Only 8% of U.S. adults over age 35 receive all of the high-priority, appropriate preventive care recommended to them—and nearly 5% don't receive any of those recommended services.<sup>10</sup> One possible reason? Patients don't understand the value of preventive care. Chronic illnesses often take time to develop. And since symptoms may not appear until several years after onset, patients may not feel any urgency around scheduling regular visits or routine screenings. That's why it's crucial for providers to clearly articulate the upfront goals and benefits to ensure patients understand the relationship between preventive care and their health.

**Here's the good news:** Patients understand their knowledge gaps better than anyone else—and they know what types of information would help them get the preventive care they need.

**Which of the following types of information would be most helpful to help you get preventive care in the future? Please select up to three answers.**

(n=18,182)





## Understanding the generational divide

Although most patients acknowledge the value of preventive care, there are stark generational differences in their willingness to pursue it. Studies show that primary care utilization is dropping<sup>11</sup> among younger patients, and that trend may threaten access to chronic care management.

Put simply, if young adults aren't getting preventive services, they may not have the resources or support they need to navigate some of the major health issues of adulthood, including substance-use disorders, reproductive health concerns and the emergence of chronic conditions like obesity and diabetes.

That concern has some merit, according to Phreesia research. Compared to patients from older generations, Gen Z and millennial patients surveyed by Phreesia are **less likely to:**

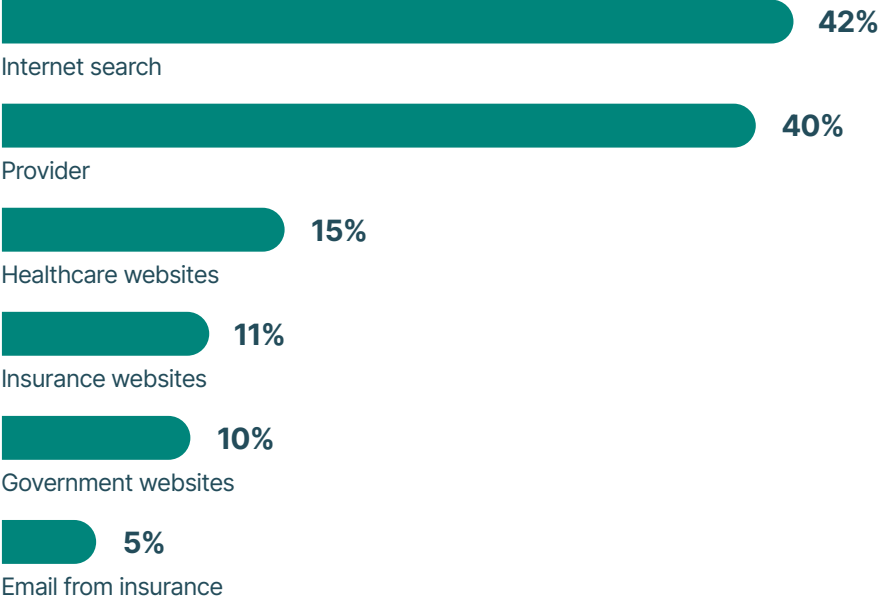
- ➔ Think they need preventive care
- ➔ Receive reminders about being due for preventive care
- ➔ Say they understand what the term “preventive care” means or covers
- ➔ Know whether preventive care is covered by their insurance
- ➔ Have received an annual wellness visit in the past year
- ➔ Believe that preventive care is “very important” to help manage their health

It's worth noting that young adults, on average, have far fewer health needs than older adults. But as people age, their risk of developing a chronic condition goes up<sup>12</sup>—as does their healthcare utilization. Not surprisingly, patients who are low healthcare utilizers may be less informed about the benefits of preventive care—and its importance for their long-term health.

To activate these patients, providers simply need to implement smarter ways to engage them. Research shows that young adults are more likely than any previous generation to choose medical providers that offer digital capabilities<sup>13</sup> for booking appointments, communicating, refilling prescriptions and more. Furthermore, Phreesia's survey found that Gen Z patients were most likely to learn about preventive care services online, rather than from their provider.

**Which resources have you used to learn about preventive care services?  
Check all that apply.**

Responses shown for Gen Z survey respondents. (n=1,044)



Young adults expect to use technology to manage their health, and they're increasingly choosing providers that empower them to do so. By leaning into that shift, healthcare organizations can more easily connect patients of all ages to the preventive care they need.



# Using technology to bridge the preventive care gap



## Targeted outreach

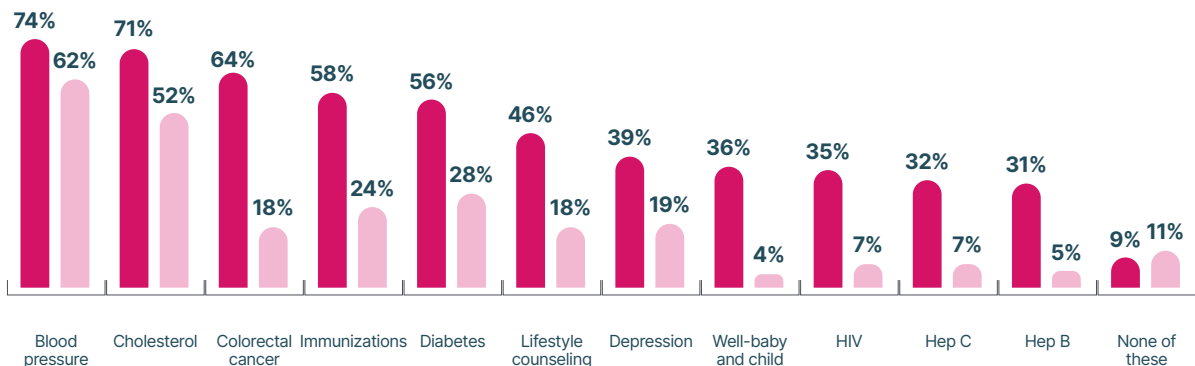
Despite being the leading cause of death and disability in the U.S., chronic diseases are often manageable—and even preventable—through early detection and healthy lifestyle habits.<sup>14</sup> Avoiding key risk behaviors like substance use, poor nutrition and physical inactivity can help patients reduce their likelihood of developing a chronic disease and improve their quality of life.

**The first step in disease prevention is education.** According to Phreesia’s survey, 84% of patients said they have “some” or “a lot” of knowledge about wellness visits, but far less knowledge about other preventive care services. More than 1 in 4 surveyed patients said they were not aware of preventive screenings for blood pressure or cholesterol, and more than one-third had not heard about preventive immunizations or screenings for diabetes or colorectal cancer. And less than half of patients were familiar with the other preventive services tested in the survey, including those for depression, well-child care, HIV and hepatitis.

### Which of the following preventive care services have you heard of / gotten in the past 12 months? Please check all that apply.

*Only the preventive care services available to all patients shown*

 Aware (n=25,724)  
 Gotten (n=20,218)



Digital outreach can help clinicians educate their patients about the importance of preventive care by delivering resource guides and learning materials to them via text message or email. Some software solutions even allow providers to demographically target their messaging so that patients are advised to seek only those services that are relevant to them. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force also maintains a list of recommended services<sup>15</sup> that providers can reference to ensure that their preventive care guidance aligns with evidence-based recommendations from national health experts.

The value of targeted digital messaging extends beyond the exam room. In Phreesia’s survey, 50% of patients said that understanding how much preventive care is covered by their insurance would help them get such care in the future. That statistic highlights a novel opportunity for providers to educate patients about the cost of their care in advance—and to alleviate any concerns about unexpected expenses.



## Automated reminders

Improving preventive care utilization isn't just about patient education. It's equally important—if not more so—to make sure that patients know when they're due for care.

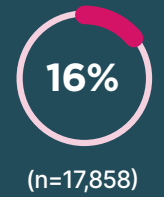
If patients don't know when they need preventive care, they're far less likely to book an appointment. And even patients who remember to schedule a routine visit may benefit from a reminder. Research shows that on a global scale, 23% of patients do not show up for their appointments, creating major gaps in their care and longer waits to see a clinician.<sup>17</sup> That's why it's crucial that providers take action to help patients understand when they need preventive care and where they can get it.

With digital appointment reminders, providers can reduce no-shows and increase preventive service utilization by notifying patients when they're due for a visit. For scheduled appointments, reminder messages should include the date, location and reason for the visit—and they should be sent automatically to save staff time, ensure consistent outreach and give patients the opportunity to confirm, cancel or reschedule their appointments well in advance.

The vast majority of patients want to be reminded to schedule preventive screenings or check-ups...

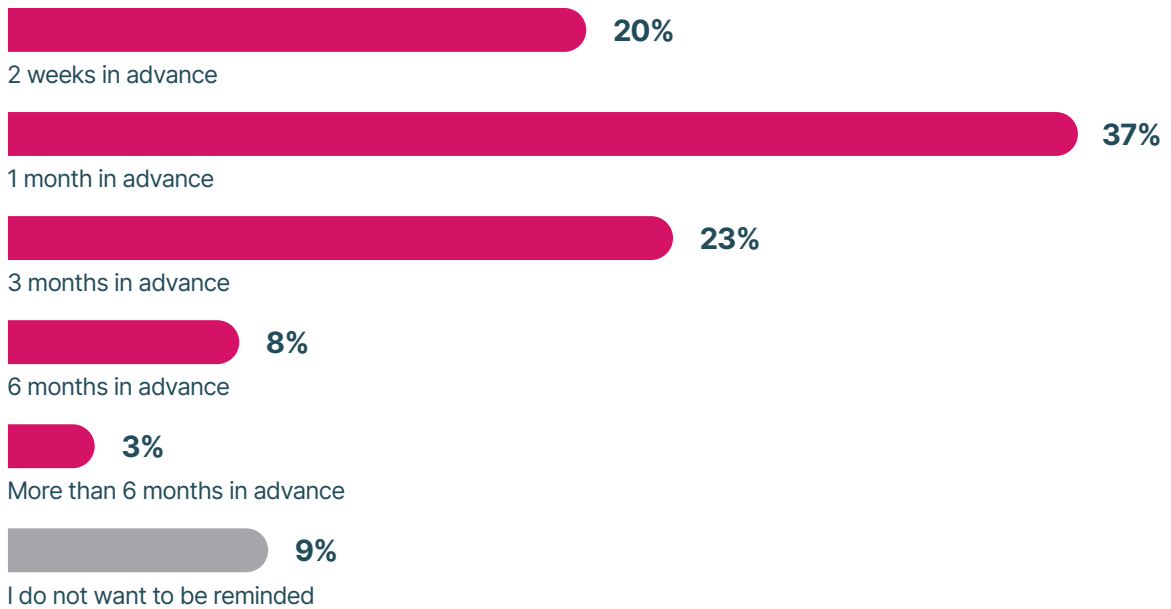


...but 1 in 6 patients do not receive any reminders about being due for preventive care.<sup>16</sup>



### How far in advance would you like to be reminded to schedule preventive care screenings or check-ups?

(n=15,400)



Automation also allows providers to meet diverse demographic needs. Phreesia research shows that patients have varying preferences on how and when they want to receive preventive care reminders. By automating the process, providers can customize the timing and cadence of reminders for specific patients or groups—and decide whether to send those reminders via text message, email, phone call or a combination, based on patients' differing needs and preferences.

## **Self-scheduling**

Time constraints continue to impede healthcare access, and Phreesia's survey reflects that trend. Among patients who said they were unlikely to get preventive care in the next year, 7% said they didn't have time—and 12% said they're not certain they'll see a doctor in the next 12 months.

At its core, scheduling care is a convenience problem. Patients who work long or nontraditional hours may be unable to call their provider during normal business hours to book a visit, much less obtain an appointment slot that accommodates their schedule. Without a flexible way to request an appointment or browse available time slots, those patients may completely forgo care.

Implementing a self-scheduling platform can help by giving patients 24/7 access to request or schedule a preventive care visit at a time and place that meets their needs. Self-scheduling also helps healthcare organizations reduce inbound calls, generating significant time savings for call-center staff and clinic schedulers. In fact, Phreesia research shows that up to 52% of all self-scheduled appointments are made outside of office hours.

While self-scheduling is beneficial for patients of all ages, it is especially helpful for engaging young adults in their care. According to a 2019 study, nearly half of the Gen Z population doesn't have a primary care physician<sup>13</sup>—but this age group also is the most willing to choose providers who offer digital capabilities, including the option to book appointments online. Not surprisingly, providers who offer self-scheduling are well positioned to capture those patients and connect them with the preventive care services they need.

Closing the preventive care gap is possible when patients are empowered with the right tools. That's why it's so important for provider organizations to put innovative technology in the hands of patients—before, during and after their visit—so that they can take an active role in their care.

Phreesia can help healthcare organizations improve visit rates, activate their patients and connect them to the preventive care services they need.

Learn how at  
[phreesia.com](https://phreesia.com)

# About Phreesia

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

## End notes

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