



TELEPHONE FOLLOW-UP FACT SHEET

Why is patient follow-up important?

Early post-discharge follow-up care is one important way to help patients avoid re-exacerbation of heart failure and reduce the incidence of preventable re-hospitalizations.

Are there studies that show the importance of timely patient follow-up?

A meta-analysis of interventions aimed at modifying hospital discharge for older patients with heart failure concluded that “comprehensive discharge planning plus post-discharge support for older patients with [congestive heart failure] significantly reduced readmission rates and may improve health outcomes such as survival and quality of life without increasing costs.”¹ While the types of post-discharge support varied by study, nearly all of them resulted in significantly fewer readmissions compared with usual care. “Comparable benefit resulted from a home visit, home visits and/or frequent telephone follow-up, and extended home care services. Increased clinic visits resulted in a non-significant decrease.”¹

One study compared a substantial variation of hospital-level rates of early post-discharge outpatient follow-up for patients hospitalized for heart failure. Patients discharged from hospitals with higher early follow-up rates had lower risks of 30-day readmission.² Between 29 to 47 percent of elderly heart failure patients are readmitted for their

condition within three to six months of an initial hospitalization.³⁻⁴ A recent analysis of Medicare claims data found that of those patients re-hospitalized for heart failure within 30 days after discharge, 52 percent had no associated bill for an outpatient visit.³ The low rate of early healthcare provider follow-up provides an opportunity to improve the “promptness and reliability of follow-up care.”

Do the AHA/ACC guidelines support patient follow-up?

Yes. Patient follow-up is generally supported by current AHA/ACC heart failure guidelines. Specifically, the guidelines state that “post-discharge systems of care, if available, should be used to facilitate the transition to effective outpatient care for patients hospitalized with heart failure (Class I, Level Of Evidence B).”⁵

Why is Get With The Guidelines®-Heart Failure urging hospitals to conduct follow-up phone calls with patients/caregivers?

As noted in the Get With The Guidelines-Heart Failure Patient Education Fact Sheet, written instructions or educational material given to patients and/or caregivers at discharge to home or during the hospital stay is a critical first step to reducing re-hospitalization.

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TAKING THE FAILURE OUT OF HEART FAILURE

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However, written instructions alone are not sufficient to reduce hospital heart failure re-admissions. A follow-up phone call can help to assess not only the patient's health status, but also whether the patient truly understands the causes of heart failure, prognosis, therapy, dietary restrictions, activity, importance of self-care adherence, and signs and symptoms of worsening heart failure. Through a timely follow-up call, healthcare providers can determine if patients are adherent to their medication plan of care and if not why as well as if and when additional follow-up consultation is needed.

What type of questions should I be asking the patient when conducting a follow-up phone call?

During a follow-up phone call it is important to assess the following:

- *Does the patient know the signs and symptoms of heart failure and what to do if the patient experiences any signs or symptoms?*
- *Is the patient currently taking medications that were prescribed at discharge? Does the patient understand why taking these medications are important? If the medical supply is low, does the patient have access to an adequate supply? If the patient is not taking medications prescribed, what is the rationale?*

- *Can the patient manage a flexible diuretic regimen for worsening signs and symptoms of volume overload?*
- *Does the patient have any questions about diet, activity, medication or other questions? Has the patient completed a scheduled follow-up appointment? Does the patient understand the importance of the follow-up visit?*

Are there specific tools that I can use to perform a follow-up phone call?

Yes, Get With The Guidelines-Heart Failure has developed a follow-up phone call form/script that can be used by hospital or ambulatory practitioners who perform follow-up phone calls with heart failure patients caregivers.

You can download the template follow-up phone form in [pdf](#) form or as a [word doc](#).

The Get With The Guidelines-Heart Failure telephone follow-up form is intended to serve as a template with the flexibility to add, omit or modify questions as deemed appropriate by the provider.

The Get With The Guidelines-Heart Failure staff would like your feedback on this fact sheet and the template form. If you have suggestions for the template or fact sheet, please email Penelope.Solis@heart.org, specifying "Target Heart Failure Follow-Up Form Feedback" in the subject line.