

More doctors are ditching the old prescription pad

May 17 2012, By LAURAN NEERGAARD , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- Doctors increasingly are ditching the prescription pad: More than a third of the nation's prescriptions now are electronic, according to the latest count.

The government has been pushing [doctors](#) to e-prescribe, in part because it can be safer for patients. This year, holdouts will start to see cuts in their [Medicare payments](#).

Thursday's report from Surescripts, the largest network for paperless prescribing, shows more doctors are signing up fast.

At the end of 2011, 36 percent of all prescriptions were electronic - the doctor wrote it by computer and sent it directly to the [pharmacy](#) with the push of a button, the report found. That's up from 22 percent of prescriptions that were paperless a year earlier.

For patients, the convenience is obvious - shorter [drugstore](#) waits. Pharmacists like not having to squint at the doctors' messy handwriting. And computerized ordering systems allow doctors to easily check that a new drug won't interact badly with one the patient's already taking.

New research by Surescripts and some pharmacies and pharmacy benefit managers uncovered another benefit: More patients pick up a new prescription when it's filed electronically.

Doctors know that too often, patients never fill some of their

prescriptions. Maybe they lose the slip of paper, or forget to drop it off, or decide they can't afford it.

The new research examined 40 million [prescriptions](#), a mix of paper, phoned, faxed or electronic ones - and found a 10 percent increase in patients who fill a prescription when it's e-prescribed.

The main reasons: Drugstores receive every paperless prescription, and they can call patients to come in and pick up their waiting medicine, said Surescripts' researcher Seth Joseph. Also, e-prescribing programs automatically show the doctor which brands are covered by the patient's insurance with the lowest out-of-pocket cost.

For several years, the government has run incentive programs to encourage doctors to adopt e-prescribing and other computerized health records, offering payments to help defray the costs of adopting the systems. Now [Medicare](#) is beginning to cut some reimbursements to certain doctors who don't e-prescribe at least a little bit.

Surescripts' report counted 390,000 doctors who were e-prescribing at least some of the time in 2011, and its records show an additional 10,000 had begun by the end of February. That translates into just over half of office-based physicians, a big jump since 2008, when only about 12 percent of doctors were e-prescribing.

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