

Patients who use doctors' online portals stay healthier

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Coinciding with calls to #stayhome and #stayhealthy comes some new advice: #stayconnected with your doctor through online patient portals.

People who engage with [health care providers](#) through online patient portals spend less time in the hospital, cutting [medical costs](#), according to a new study published in the June 2020 issue of *MIS Quarterly*.

In the first large-scale, longitudinal analysis to explore how use of patient portals affects individual health outcomes, researchers at The University of Texas at Austin found that patients with chronic disease who used the technology were less likely to be hospitalized, need [emergency care](#) or be readmitted. They also had [shorter hospital stays](#).

"The study is good news for hospitals and patients alike," said lead researcher Indranil Bardhan, professor of information, risk and operations management in UT Austin's McCombs School of Business. "Effective use of patient health information systems is a good predictor of future patient behaviors and health outcomes."

Through portals, patients can request medication refills, view lab results and X-rays, track and update [medical history](#) and securely email physicians.

These conveniences carry a hefty price tag for hospitals in human capital and training, and the researchers wondered whether it was worth the expense in terms of patients' long-term health.

They partnered with UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas to study patient portal logs for 3,266 patients with [congestive heart failure](#) over a 12-year period, noting which portal features the patients used and how much time they spent engaging with them.

On average, those who effectively used the portals were 2% to 4% less likely to be hospitalized, which translates to thousands of patients for even a medium-sized hospital—and at \$30,000 per patient, a significant savings for the system.

The researchers also found that those engaging with the portal were 3.2% less likely to visit the emergency room, and those who were hospitalized had shorter stays, by about 11%.

Importantly, readmission rates—meaning a patient is hospitalized more than once in a 30-day period—were about 2% lower among users of patient portals. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services uses these rates to benchmark hospitals against their local peers, so hospitals with lower [readmission rates](#) avoid significant financial penalties.

Bardhan said it is in the interest of hospitals and insurance companies to get patients on board, and mobile technologies may be key, especially in light of the current pandemic. Providers have already begun offering patients free health-tracking accessories as an incentive to keep in touch with their health team, improve care coordination, and drive change.

"It's clear that when patients are able to engage more effectively with their providers about their health status, it helps to create the lifestyle improvements that lead to better [health outcomes](#)," Bardhan said.

More information: *MIS Quarterly*, [DOI: 10.25300/MISQ/2020/14180](https://doi.org/10.25300/MISQ/2020/14180)

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