



## CAHPS: Integrated Reference Guide for Physicians

The Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CAHPS®) survey is a nationally standardized instrument used to assess patients’ experiences with their health plans, physicians, specialists, and the healthcare system overall. Administered by certified vendors on behalf of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), state health departments, and the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA), CAHPS surveys are required for regulatory and accreditation purposes and are distributed annually to a random sample of members across Medicare, Medicaid, commercial, and exchange populations.

CAHPS results provide actionable insight into how patients perceive access to care, communication, coordination, and quality. When thoughtfully applied, these insights allow physician practices to strengthen patient relationships, improve clinical workflows, and support continuous quality improvement. The strategies below integrate evidence-based best practices with a patient-centered, conversational approach that can be readily applied in everyday clinical settings.

### Timely Access to Appointments and Care

CAHPS Focus Areas	Integrated Best Practices
<p>Receiving care promptly when it is urgently needed</p> <p>Being seen within 15 minutes of the scheduled appointment time</p> <p>Obtaining routine or follow-up appointments without unnecessary delay</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set clear expectations around scheduling timelines so patients can plan effectively and feel respected.</li> <li>• Communicate delays proactively through text messages, phone calls, or in-office updates, and offer alternatives such as rescheduling or virtual visits when appropriate.</li> <li>• Reserve same-day or urgent appointment slots and consider extended evening or weekend hours to increase access.</li> <li>• Educate patients on how to obtain care after hours, including nurse advice lines or telehealth services.</li> <li>• Ask patients about transportation challenges and assist them in identifying available resources to prevent missed appointments.</li> </ul>

## Access to Needed Care and Services

CAHPS Focus Areas	Integrated Best Practices
<p>Timely access to specialist appointments</p> <p>Ease of obtaining recommended tests, treatments, or procedures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explain the clinical reasoning behind referrals, tests, or treatments so patients understand how these recommendations support their health goals.</li><li>• Develop relationships with a reliable network of specialists to streamline referrals and reduce delays.</li><li>• Whenever possible, help patients schedule specialist appointments before they leave the office and ask about any barriers they may encounter.</li><li>• Encourage staff to support patients in identifying in-network services such as laboratories, imaging centers, and radiology providers.</li></ul>

## Communication That Builds Trust

CAHPS Focus Areas	Integrated Best Practices
<p>Clear explanations that patients can easily understand</p> <p>Patients feeling that sufficient time was spent with their physician</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use plain, respectful language and avoid unnecessary medical jargon.</li><li>• Practice two-way communication by inviting questions, encouraging feedback, and engaging patients in shared decision-making.</li><li>• Apply health literacy techniques, such as the teach-back method, to confirm understanding and reinforce care plans.</li><li>• Be attentive to cultural preferences, social needs, and care received from other providers to ensure conversations feel personalized and inclusive.</li></ul>

## Coordination and Continuity of Care

CAHPS Focus Areas	Integrated Best Practices
<p>Availability of medical records during visits</p> <p>Timely communication of test results</p> <p>Provider awareness of care received from specialists</p> <p>Medication review and management</p> <p>Support with coordinating care across multiple providers and services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review relevant medical history and specialist information prior to visits to ensure continuity and efficiency.</li> <li>• Establish clear processes for communicating test results, including setting expectations for timing (e.g., routine vs. urgent results).</li> <li>• Encourage patients to enroll in and use patient portals for secure access to test results, visit summaries, and care instructions.</li> <li>• Review medications at each visit and reinforce adherence, while encouraging patients to report side effects or concerns.</li> <li>• Provide additional care coordination support for patients with complex or multiple healthcare needs, including post-hospitalization follow-up.</li> </ul>

## Overall Perception of Care Quality

CAHPS Focus Areas	Integrated Best Practices
<p>Patient rating of overall healthcare quality on a 0–10 scale</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use patient feedback and CAHPS data to identify trends and guide quality improvement initiatives.</li> <li>• Consider forming patient or family advisory councils to gain deeper insight into the patient experience and practice operations.</li> </ul>

## Preventive Care and Immunizations

CAHPS Focus Areas	Integrated Best Practices
<p>Recommend the flu vaccine to all eligible patients and offer it during office visits whenever possible.</p> <p>Reinforce evidence-based messaging around vaccine safety and effectiveness.</p> <p>Promote vaccination through multiple channels, including patient portals, office signage, and appointment reminders.</p> <p>Inform patients about alternative vaccination locations, such as pharmacies or community clinics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Receipt of an annual influenza vaccination</li></ul>

## Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness

CAHPS Focus Areas	Integrated Best Practices
<p>Availability of interpreter services when needed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify patients' language preferences in advance and arrange interpretation services as needed.</li><li>• Demonstrate cultural humility and sensitivity, which supports trust, understanding, and improved health outcomes.</li></ul>

## Creating a Welcoming Practice Environment

CAHPS Focus Areas	Integrated Best Practices
Overall patient comfort and satisfaction during visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Maintain clean, organized, and welcoming office and waiting areas.</li><li>• Communicate service standards clearly to staff and reinforce empathy, professionalism, and personalized care.</li><li>• Simple enhancements, such as comfortable seating, water, reading materials, or clear signage, can positively influence the patient experience.</li></ul>