

# Cleveland Clinic is now charging for patient-provider messaging

Article



**The news:** Cleveland Clinic is now billing for certain messages between patients and providers that take place on the health system's **MyChart** portal. Health plans will be on the hook for most of the charges, but uninsured consumers and those with high-deductible plans could be billed up to \$50 per message.

**What's Cleveland Clinic billing for?** Over the past three years, the number of messages that Cleveland Clinic providers answer on MyChart has doubled. So, as of November 17, some online messages that require a provider's clinical expertise and take longer than 5 minutes to answer will be billed. Examples include:

- Changes to prescriptions (medication refills will still be a free service).
- New symptoms requiring medical evaluation.
- Changes to or check-ups on a long-term condition.
- Requests to complete medical forms.

Costs for patients will depend on their specific health plan, but even covered members may still be billed for a co-pay. Without insurance, or if a patient's deductible isn't met, **it can cost the patient up to \$50 per message.**

**Not everything in MyChart will come with a price tag:** Other patient portal services such as scheduling appointments, asking questions that lead to a visit, follow-up questions about an appointment that took place in the past week, checking in after a procedure, and general quick updates will remain unbilled.

**Zooming out:** While most provider organizations do not bill for patient-physician portal messaging, Cleveland Clinic isn't alone in experimenting with this strategy.

- Last year, the **University of California San Francisco (UCSF)** rolled out a similar plan. And other hospitals are considering following Cleveland Clinic's and UCSF's lead, per Cleveland.com.
- The newly introduced **Amazon Clinic** *only* offers [messaging-based services](#)—which it charges patients for—in lieu of video or audio chats.

**What's driving the shift?** We think there are 2 key factors pushing healthcare providers to find more ways to bill for doctors' time:

**1. Physicians are drained from digital information overload.** The [number of online messages](#) from patients **increased by more than 150% at the onset of the pandemic**, per data from electronic health record company Epic.

Expecting doctors to handle this messaging volume without being compensated could lead to higher levels of clinician burnout, which is already a challenge that hospitals are grappling with

amidst COVID-19.

**2. Health systems need to generate revenue.** COVID-19 continues to [squeeze hospitals' operating margins](#), which remain in the red and below pre-pandemic levels, per Kaufman Hall's October 2022 National Hospital Flash Report.

When patients message doctors and get the answers they need, a visit may no longer be necessary. And if that message isn't billed for, it hurts a provider's bottom line, particularly in a fee-for-service reimbursement environment.

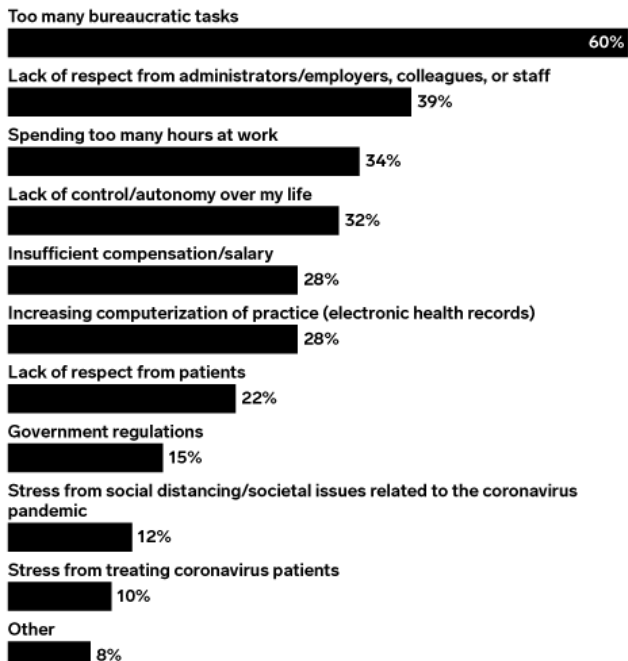
**Our take:** Health systems are being forced to make difficult decisions in the face of declining revenues. Doctors' time = money, so charging for online messages between patients and providers seems sensible.

At the same time, services billed for must have transparent pricing and a component of clinical expertise involved that would be covered in a telehealth visit anyway (i.e., not charging for filling out medical forms).

We could see more organizations adopt this approach or even pivot to a subscription-based model where online messages in between visits are included in a flat membership fee.

## Leading Factors that Contribute to Burnout According to US Physicians, Sep 2021

% of respondents



Source: Medscape, "Physician Burnout & Depression Report 2022," Jan 21, 2022

273265

InsiderIntelligence.com

*This article originally appeared in Insider Intelligence's Digital Health Briefing—a daily recap of top stories reshaping the healthcare industry. Subscribe to have more hard-hitting takeaways delivered to your inbox daily.*

- Are you a client? [Click here to subscribe.](#)
- Want to learn more about how you can benefit from our expert analysis? [Click here.](#)