

## Using the PHQ-9: A Guide for Medical Assistants, Front and Back Office Staff

### *What is the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9)?*

The PHQ-9 is a simple, nine question form used to screen depression and monitor changes in signs/symptoms of depression. The patient's PHQ-9 score should be recorded at the beginning of a visit, like blood pressure or other vitals.

Depression screening workflows often include front office staff, medical assistants, and other care team members who might not be used to tracking depression in the same way as other vitals. It is important that the patient sees that all staff feel just as comfortable administering the PHQ-9 as any other vital sign, creating a welcoming environment.

### *Screening with the PHQ-9*

The PHQ-9 can be filled out two ways; directly handing a copy to the patient to complete on their own or being administered verbally by staff as part of the rooming process. Studies have shown that patients can successfully fill out this form by themselves and do not always require assistance. If the PHQ-9 is being administered verbally, it is crucial that the administrator asks the question to the patient exactly as it is written on the form to ensure accurate data.

Once a patient fills out the PHQ-9, the person administering the scale should immediately enter the numbers into EHR and/or registry. **Do NOT enter "0" on the PHQ-9 if the patient did not complete the form.** Instead, a note should be made in the EHR and/or registry outlining why PHQ-9 scores are not available. Entering a score of "0" falsely shows improvement in the patient's symptoms.

### *Common Questions When Presenting PHQ-9 to Patients*

The following Q&A is intended to help staff feel more comfortable answering the questions they may be asked by patients about the PHQ-9.

## Example Questions from Patients Regarding the PHQ-9

<b>Patient Question:</b>	<b>Why do I need to fill this out?</b>
<b>Answer</b>	<p><b>SCREENING</b> Much like taking your blood pressure or temperature, we're also focused on your overall health and well-being over the past 2 weeks.</p> <p><b>FOLLOW-UP</b> (<i>already in treatment</i>) Your provider wants to know more about your overall health so that we can properly gauge if the treatment is working the way it should.</p>
<b>Patient Question:</b>	<b>If I don't feel like I have these problems, should I still fill this out?</b>
<b>Answer</b>	<p>Absolutely, it's just as vital as tracking your blood pressure or temperature to properly assess your overall health and well-being. Like other factors, this metric is particularly useful when tracked over time.</p> <p>[Ask the patient if they have concerns. If they do then say I'll tell your provider you would like to talk about it.]</p>
<b>Patient Question:</b>	<b>Do I have to fill this out even if I'm not comfortable answering these questions?</b>
<b>Answer</b>	You never have to fill out a form or answer questions that you're not comfortable with, but we strongly recommend you do to help us provide better care.
<b>Patient Question:</b>	<b>I would rather just talk to my provider about these questions instead of filling this out. Is that OK?</b>
<b>Answer</b>	Yes, of course.
<b>Patient Question:</b>	<b>I don't understand some of these questions. Can you help me?</b>
<b>Answer</b>	If you have questions about the specific items on the form and how they apply to you, it would be best to talk about that with your provider.

