

# The Use of Symptom Diaries in Outpatient Care

SYMPTOM DIARIES CAN HELP ORGANIZE THE  
DETAILS OF A PATIENT'S HISTORY.

Lori, a 31-year-old woman with a history of bipolar disorder, fibromyalgia, and migraine headaches, presents for follow-up in the office after visiting the emergency department (ED) with a severe headache. She has presented to the ED 13 times in the past year with varying complaints. She reports almost daily headaches, which are intermittent but often last “for days.” An increase in stress, depressive symptoms, and medication changes have all confounded recent headache activity. She has consumed all of her triptan abortive medication. Where do you begin?

Caring for patients like Lori who have multiple complaints but offer vague or confusing information can be a challenge. Making sense of the disorganized details of the patient's history is often limited not only by time available at the appointment but also by the patient's insight, recall bias, and anxiety.

One strategy for improving information-gathering during the patient encounter is the use of symptom diaries.

## Definition and benefits

Symptom diaries, or patient logs, are simple tools patients can use to record their symptoms or activities in an organized manner over a defined period of time to augment the diagnostic and therapeutic process. The patient's chief complaint and the objectives of keeping the diary

determine much of the information included. However, key features usually include symptom timing, duration, associated symptoms, triggers, alleviating factors, and lifestyle considerations.

Symptom diaries offer several benefits:

- **Patient engagement and control.** Keeping a symptom diary gives the patient a sense of control and direct involvement in the treatment plan. For some patients, the process of writing out their symptoms, experience, and emotions provides a therapeutic behavioral benefit as well.
  - **Time savings.** The amount of time it takes a physician to review a one-page diary is substantially less than the time it takes to verbally interview a patient for the information.
  - **Focused information gathering.** A diary can organize the patient's history for more meaningful clinical interpretation.
  - **Trigger identification.** A diary can help the physician identify nuances of symptoms within a disease process and can directly lead to activity modification and lifestyle changes that optimize overall function.
  - **Visual assessment.** Visual learners can quickly scan the document and digest the information.
  - **Cost savings.** Symptom diaries can create a more thorough history, which has the potential to limit unnecessary laboratory and radiographic testing.
- Paper, Internet, and mobile options exist. Simple paper

## About the Author

Dr. Hodge is a family physician practicing with Pardee Hendersonville Family Health Center and is a clinical instructor with the Mountain Area Health Education Center Family Medicine Residency Program in Hendersonville, N.C. Author disclosure: no relevant financial affiliations disclosed.



frequency. When evaluating incontinence, leak episodes and volumes should be attained. The duration of the diary can range from 24 hours to two weeks depending on the purpose of the evaluation. The timing of voids in relation to oral intake can identify the most problematic times of the day and help the physician address behavioral aspects of management. In addition, the diary can establish a baseline for quantifying the effects of bladder drills, retraining, and pharmacologic interventions.

■ Symptom diaries, or patient logs, are available in both paper and electronic formats.

■ A general symptom diary can be helpful for patients with vague somatic complaints.

■ If a patient will not complete a basic symptom diary, this may signal that the patient is struggling with larger issues.

**General symptom diary.** Perhaps one of the most useful purposes for a symptom diary is for patients to document vague somatic complaints such as general pain syndromes, irritable bowel syndrome, fatigue, gastrointestinal disorders, menstrual irregularities, cardiac symptoms, or neurologic complaints. A general symptom diary (see a sample on page 27) may help to identify a more objective trend to solidify an underlying diagnosis or syndrome.

A general symptom diary can also allow more focus on the patient by obtaining critical aspects in a presentable, concise format. Fatigue and pain symptoms are unique and personal experiences for patients. Reviewing the diary directly with the patient validates his or her complaints, demonstrates caring and trust, and provides an excellent foundation for setting reasonable expectations. This, in and of itself, enhances the therapeutic relationship with these patients, who may be perceived as being difficult. Identifying the ups and downs

associated with their problem can also help illustrate the course of illness and promote patient resiliency.

**Other uses.** Symptom diaries can be helpful with other conditions as well, such as endometriosis, heart failure, asthma, chronic pain, chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, heartburn, hypertension, blood glucose disorders, breast feeding disorders, and menstrual disorders.

## Challenges

When using symptom diaries with patients, physicians may encounter the following challenges.

**Patient nonadherence.** Adherence rates vary widely. Use of simplified formats individualized to the needs of the patient and direct physician instruction can improve compliance rates. However, certain patients simply will not complete the diary. This should signal to the clinician that the patient may be struggling with larger issues, and it may even serve as a prognostic indicator.

**Symptom recall.** A study of healthy females found that symptom diaries resulted in increased recall of daily symptoms and increased perception of symptom severity.<sup>2</sup> This tendency is something physicians should keep in mind as they interpret the data.

**Perceived dismissal of the patient's concerns.** Many patients are conditioned to getting a quick solution to their health care

## Free electronic resources

Symptom	Name	Website	Mobile app	Features
Headache	iHeadache	<a href="http://www.iheadacheapp.com/">http://www.iheadacheapp.com/</a>	Blackberry, iPad, iPhone,	Point-of-symptom entry; detailed symptom entry; email reports
Food/Activity	Calorie Count	<a href="http://caloriecount.about.com/cc/mobile.php">http://caloriecount.about.com/cc/mobile.php</a>	Android, iPad, iPhone	Food, activity, water, and weight-loss logs; dashboard displays; community support forums
	MyFitnessPal	<a href="http://www.myfitnesspal.com">http://www.myfitnesspal.com</a>	Android, Blackberry, iPhone, Windows	Food, activity, and body log; reports; forums and community
Sleep	Sleep Diary	<a href="http://www.patient.co.uk/mobile.asp">http://www.patient.co.uk/mobile.asp</a>	iPad, iPhone	Questionnaire allows for automated data collection and reports
Voiding	iP Voiding Diary	<a href="http://www.ip-voiding-diary.com/">http://www.ip-voiding-diary.com/</a>	iPhone	Simplified icons; graph displays



problems. Chronic conditions without a clear explanation are a challenge for patients, and they may be frustrated with the assignment of keeping a symptom diary. The manner in which the plan is delivered to the patient should explain why this may be a helpful tool and how it can augment the treatment plan.

**Complicated schematics.** Some symptom diaries, particularly elaborate electronic ones, may be too complicated for certain patients to use. A symptom diary needs to be intuitive and simple enough to complete quickly and easily.

**Too many options.** There are numerous resources to choose from, especially for fitness- and nutrition-related tracking apps, but there are limited uniform resources with validation. The best approach is to familiarize yourself with a few options that you can offer to your patients.

### A low-cost, low-risk tool

A symptom diary is a simple, effective, clinical tool to augment the diagnostic and therapeutic process for patients in the outpatient setting.

Patient logging of specified symptoms or activities in an organized manner improves history taking with minimal risk and cost. It may even help patients avoid unnecessary laboratory tests, radiographic procedures, and pharmacologic interventions, as well as the associated costs and potential harms. While format unification and validation would further legitimize outpatient use, physicians need not wait for the perfect resource. Even simple paper-based symptom diaries, such as those presented with this article, can yield tremendous benefits. **FPM**

1. Hollis JF, Gulilon CM, Stevens VJ, et al. Weight loss during the intensive intervention phase of the weight-loss maintenance trial. *Am J Prev Med.* 2008;35(2):118-126.
2. Ferrari R, Russel AS. Effect of a symptom diary on symptom frequency and intensity in healthy subjects. *J Rheumatol.* 2010;37(11):2387-2389.

Send comments to [fpmedit@aafp.org](mailto:fpmedit@aafp.org), or add your comments to the article at <http://www.aafp.org/fpm/2013/0500/p24.html>.

■ Help patients understand why a symptom diary may be a helpful tool in their diagnosis and treatment.

■ Make sure the diary isn't too complicated; even simple paper tools can be effective.

## Engaging patients in self-management is a critical step in PCMH transformation.

Our experts will help you develop skills to engage patients.

Participate in the AAFP's free PCMH series on Patient Self-Management. Each 60-minute webinar includes time for Q&A.

### Motivational Interviewing: Can I really influence my patient's motivation to change?

by Denise Ernst, PhD  
May 22, 1:00-2:00 p.m. CT

### Health Coaching: Practical Lessons from the Field

by Amireh Ghorob, MPH and  
Lauren Scherer, MS  
June 26, 1:00-2:00 p.m. CT

### A Team Model for Integrating Self-Management Support into Patient Visits: Skills, EHR Applications, and Training

by Berdi Safford, MD, and  
Larry Mauksch, M.ED  
July 24, 1:00-2:00 p.m. CT



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF  
FAMILY PHYSICIANS



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF  
FAMILY PHYSICIANS  
FOUNDATION

Register for free today at [aafp.org/psm](http://aafp.org/psm)

Financial support provided by the American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation