



# Patient Communication Preferences: The COVID-19 Impact

How to improve efficiency and satisfaction along the patient journey

Has COVID-19 changed the way patients want health systems to communicate with them?  
SR Health by Solutionreach commissioned a survey to find out.



## Table of Contents

Methodology ... 3

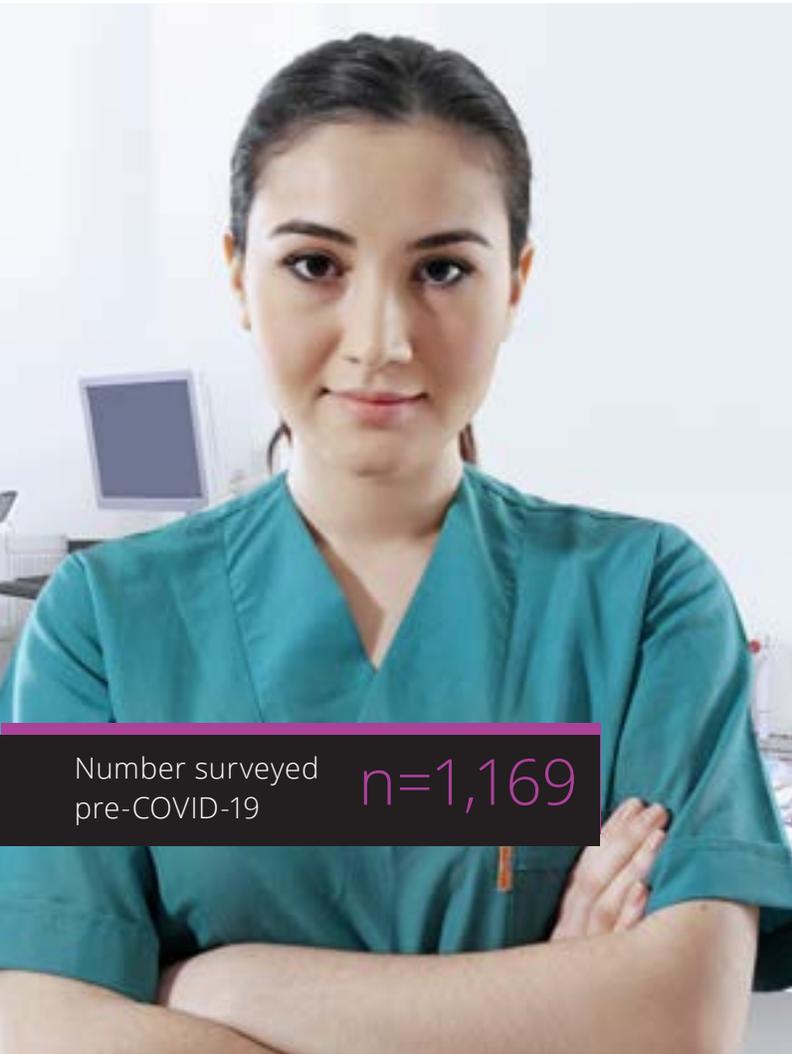
Executive summary ... 4

Key findings ... 5-8

Communication preferences ... 9-10

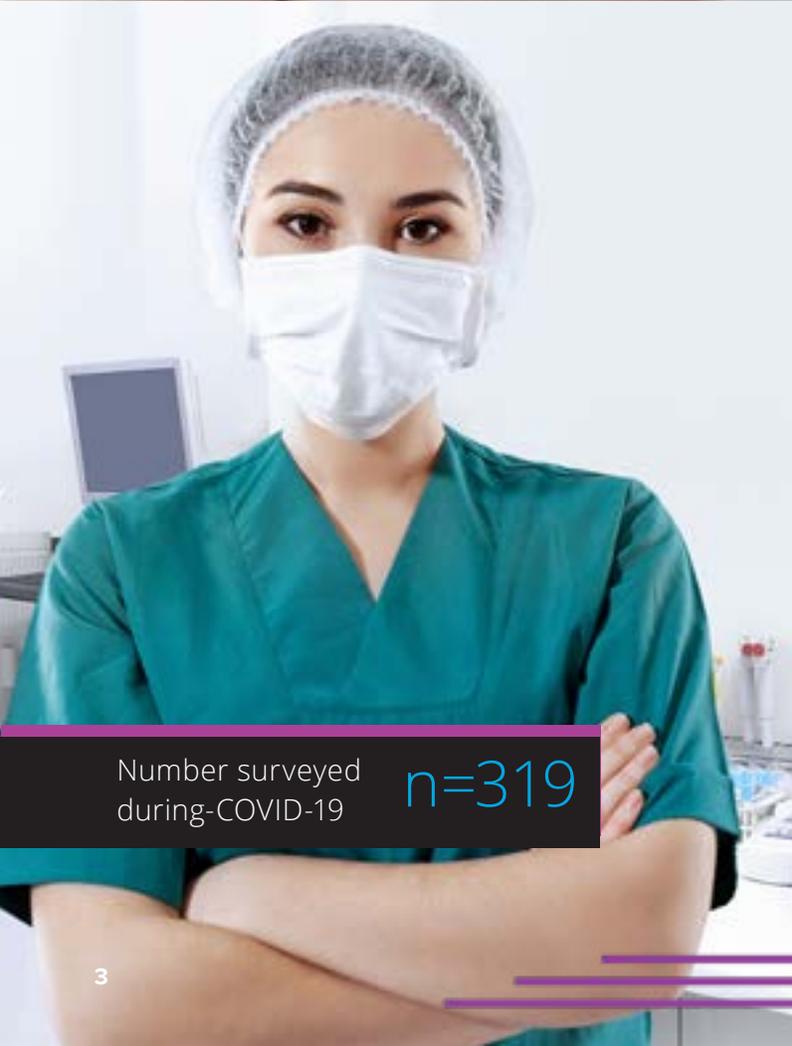
Conclusions ... 11-12





Number surveyed  
pre-COVID-19

n=1,169



Number surveyed  
during-COVID-19

n=319

# Methodology

SR Health by Solutionreach commissioned a two-part patient research study to better understand if COVID-19 impacted:

- Patients' healthcare communication preferences across the patient journey (scheduling, patient care, financial, and patient outreach)
- Where opportunities for automation may exist within these preferences

The initial survey (n=1,169) was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic and captured some of the last known data about pre-COVID patient communication preferences.

The second survey (n=319) is one of the first studies to address the impact of COVID-19 on patient communication preferences.

In both parts of the survey, respondents were screened specific to their identification and recent experience with an enterprise healthcare setting. Participants were then questioned about their communication with providers to ascertain their preferences and satisfaction throughout four stages of the patient lifecycle:

- Scheduling
- Patient care
- Financial
- Patient outreach

Only the second survey, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, collected data regarding patient preferences and satisfaction with telehealth.

# Executive Summary

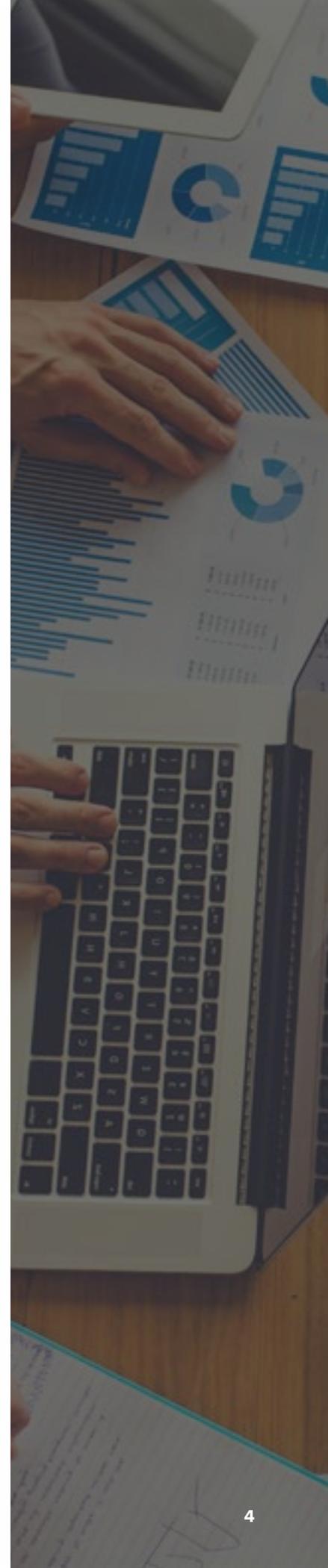
## Subtle shifts reveal areas of opportunity.

SR Health by Solutionreach collected some of the last known data about pre-COVID-19 patient communication preferences when it commissioned a study to better understand patients' communication likes and dislikes at four key parts of the patient journey: scheduling, patient care, financial, and patient outreach. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, SR Health conducted another survey to capture its impact on the same four parts of the patient journey, as well as on telehealth communication.

Together, this information offers a unique comparison of patient communication preferences before and during COVID-19 and insight into where enterprise healthcare organizations should focus their efforts to streamline communication for increased efficiency and patient satisfaction.

According to the data, decreased patient satisfaction during COVID-19 highlights opportunities to improve the quality of communication service—especially in the financial and patient outreach portions of the patient journey. Particularly important is the continued support for automated communication, with patients showing openness to new technology.

COVID-19 didn't significantly change the perceived desirability of automation in patient communication. Yet the pandemic did change how patients prefer to communicate. It appears that they're moving away from live telephone calls and toward more convenient, digital communication. The changes may signal that patients recognize the benefits of digital communication technology within a holistic healthcare communication strategy.



# Key Findings

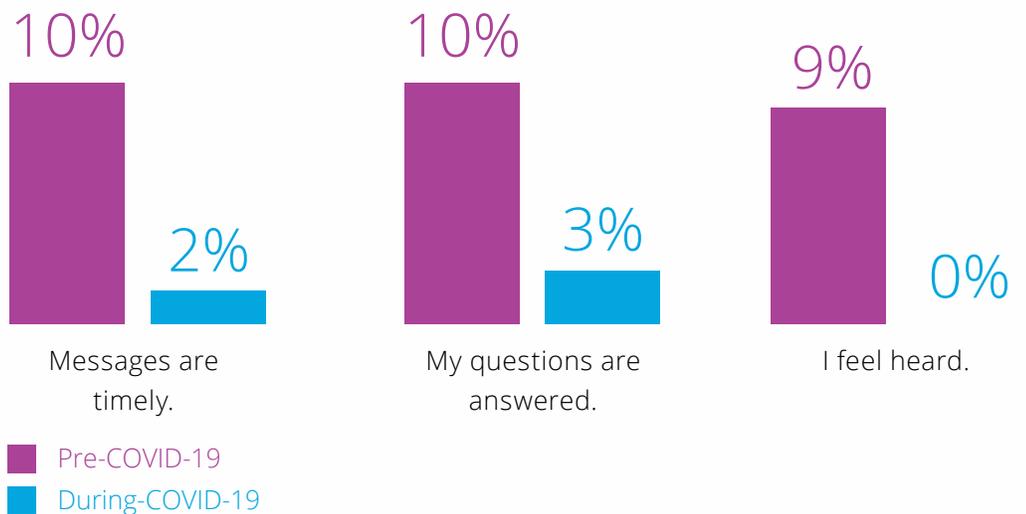
Overall patient satisfaction is slipping.



Overall, the level of patient satisfaction with healthcare communication during COVID-19 decreased by seven percent compared with pre-COVID-19 numbers.

So, why the slip? The survey asked patients why they were satisfied or unsatisfied with their providers and offered a list of options to choose from. Three attributes of provider communication that were cited as driving satisfaction pre-COVID were much less likely to be acknowledged as driving satisfaction during COVID. Patients' responses indicated less timely communication with their providers, a tougher time getting questions answered, and not being "heard" as well during the pandemic.

## How often are provider communication attributes cited as a driver of satisfaction?



This data is likely a result of the unusual burdens on staff during the pandemic. It begs the question: How can healthcare organizations ensure timely, relevant communication with their patients without adding more burdens to their staff?

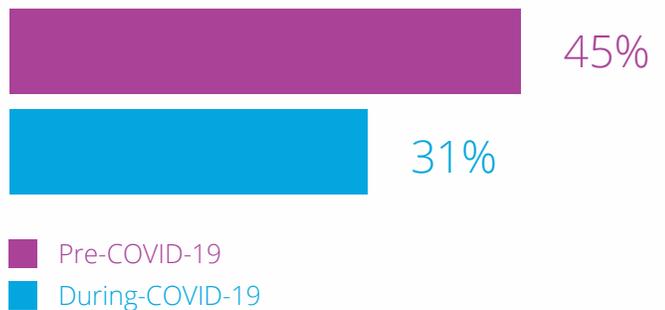


## Time to hang up the telephone?

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, patients have adjusted how they want to communicate with their healthcare providers.

Before the pandemic, telephone conversations with a live person were the most desirable form of communication across all generations surveyed (Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z).

### Preference for live telephone calls



During COVID-19, the desirability of live phone calls dropped 14 percent.

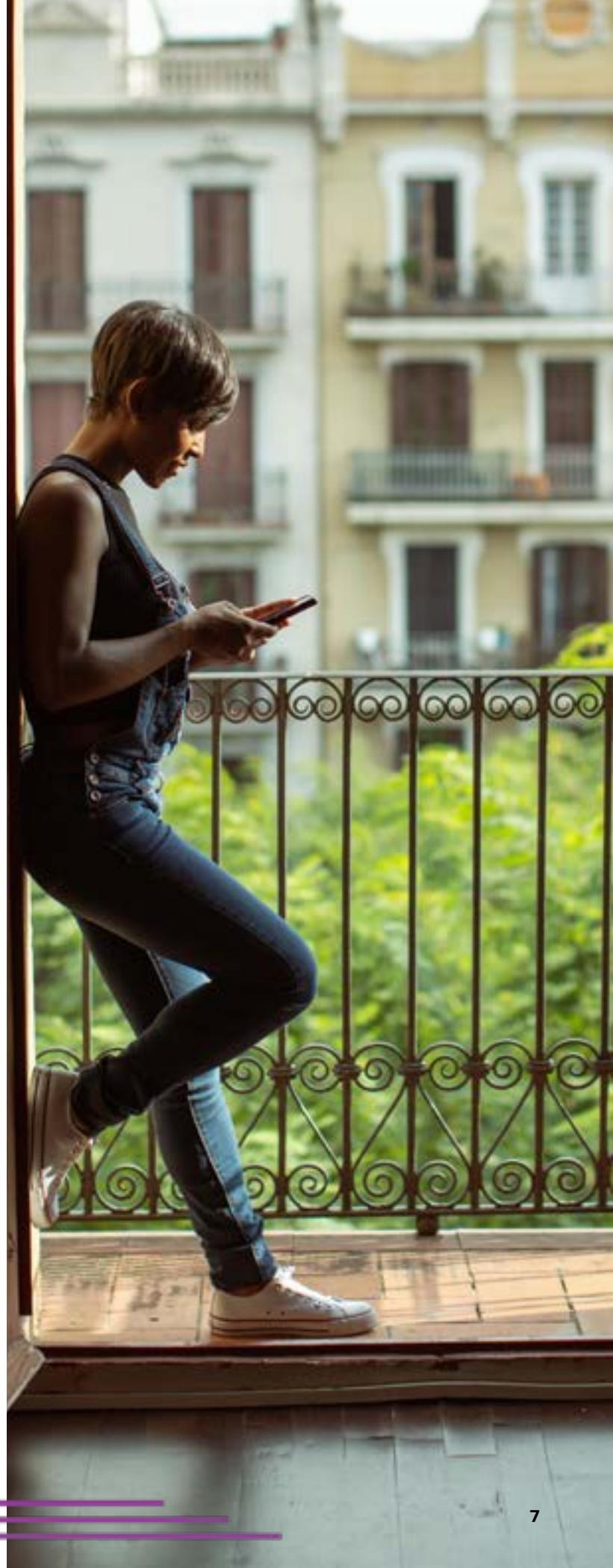
## Why the digital uptick?

Why the switch from phone to digital communication preferences? Patient comments suggest digital methods such as text are easy to check and they can be accessed anywhere, at any time. In other words, they're more convenient.

Therefore, digital communication may be one way to help patients feel heard again, without added burden on staff resources.

### Patient comments about text communication:

- "It's just a lot simpler. I prefer texting over all the other options. You can deal with it when you want or have the time, instead of being interrupted."
- "It is easy to get a quick response without much effort."
- "Easy to use. I know instantly when I have a message. I can easily respond from almost anywhere."

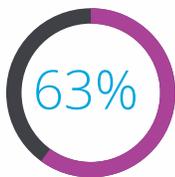




## Patients are open to new technology.

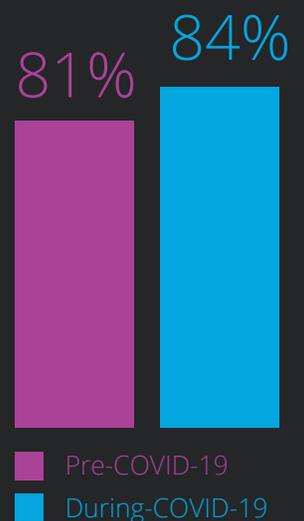
It's clear that patients are open to using new technology for care delivery and for communication with providers.

During the pandemic, only 23 percent of patients' appointments proceeded in-person. Another 36 percent of patients had appointments canceled or rescheduled, while 41 percent reported that one or all of their appointments moved to telehealth.

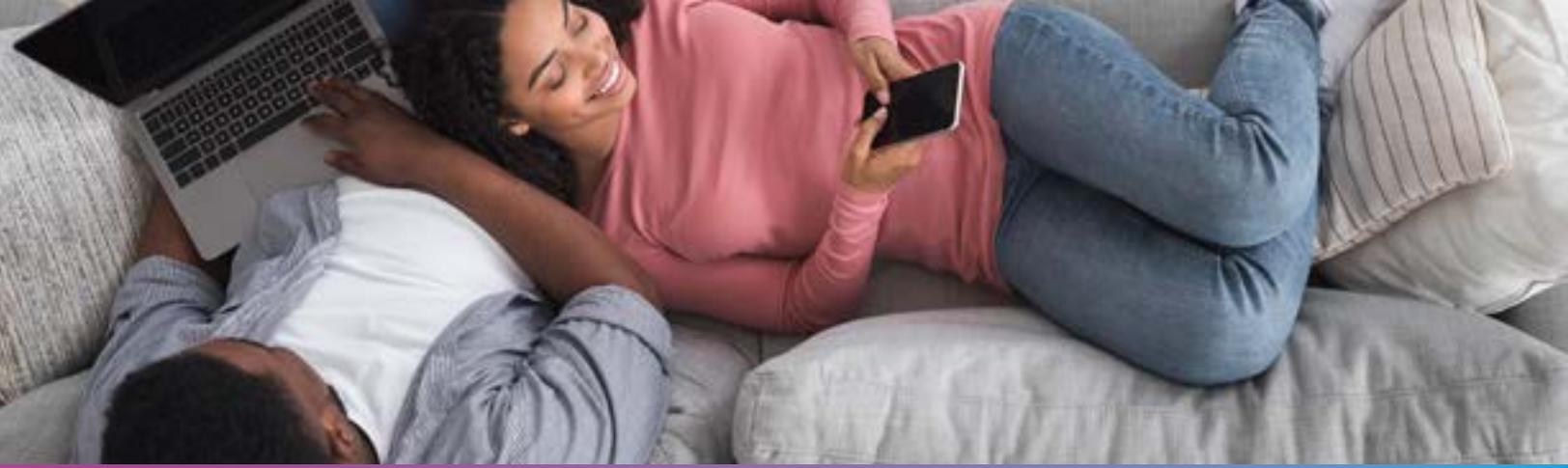


said they feel comfortable participating in telehealth visits.

The vast majority of patients—78 percent—had never used telehealth before COVID-19. Despite the unfamiliarity, 63 percent said they feel comfortable participating in telehealth visits. Even when in-person visits are completely safe, 60 percent say they'll continue with either a mix of telehealth and in-person appointments (35 percent) or telehealth-only visits (25 percent).



Patients also reveal a steadfast desire for communication automation. The percentage of those finding it desirable rose from 81 percent before COVID-19 to 84 percent during the pandemic.



# Communication Preference Insights

Here is a look at how many patients felt automated communication via text and email were effective across the patient journey, both before and during COVID-19.

## Scheduling

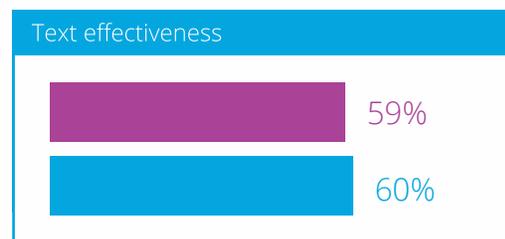
Scheduling communications include things like changes to appointments, reminders, pre-visit instructions, and referrals.



■ Pre-COVID-19 ■ During-COVID-19

## Patient care

The care phase of healthcare includes, but is not limited to, post-visit summaries, care instructions, reminders to encourage healthy behaviors, and post-visit surveys on care received.

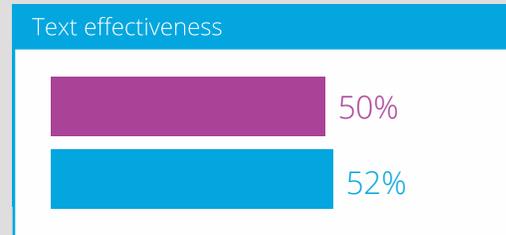


■ Pre-COVID-19 ■ During-COVID-19



## Financial

The financial communications in healthcare include things like collecting payments for care and updating payment information.



■ Pre-COVID-19 ■ During-COVID-19

## Patient outreach

Patient outreach includes many communications such as demographic-based patient education and seasonal health updates and alerts like flu shots.



■ Pre-COVID-19 ■ During-COVID-19

Particularly steady was the overall desirability of communication automation at the financial and patient outreach stages of the patient journey.

### Desire for automated financial communication



■ Pre-COVID-19 ■ During-COVID-19

### Desire for automated patient outreach communication





# Steady Support for Digital Communication = Opportunity to Improve Satisfaction

On the whole, patients' satisfaction with health systems' communication methods has slipped in recent months. COVID-19 has revealed some cracks in the communication foundation, with patients perceiving less timely communication and a decreased ability to be heard.

Examining the impact of COVID-19 on patient communication uncovers opportunities to strengthen satisfaction at different stages throughout the patient journey. Although the data shifts are subtle, they indicate that patients desire the ease and convenience of digital communication. As health systems consider ways to streamline operations, digital communication platforms may offer efficiencies that also satisfy patients.

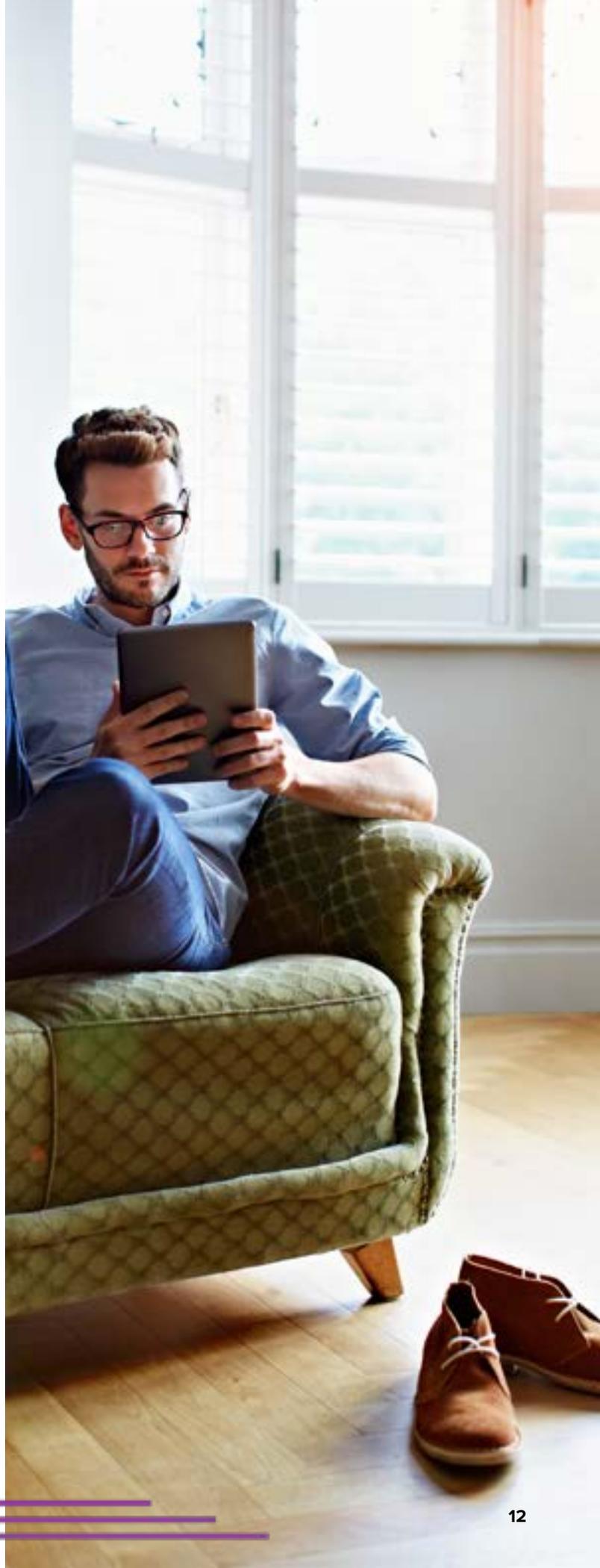
Patients were open to new technology before the pandemic; they are even more so now.

Telehealth is only one example. Both before and during COVID-19, more than half of patients said communication automation is a desirable and convenient way to get faster responses from their healthcare providers.

As long as healthcare organizations properly educate patients about their digital communication applications, the data from these surveys indicates patients may welcome more automated communication methods within a holistic communication strategy.

## Patient comments about digital communication:

- "An automated system is the way to go. It helps me ask questions at any time of day, regardless of office hours."
- "I feel like texting would be the best and most efficient method."
- "Being able to get quick responses from my doctor to questions means less time in the office for something that a quick message would have answered... and [it] gives the doctor time to see the patients that need to be seen."
- "The quicker I can get answers concerning my health, the better I feel."





SR Health by Solutionreach provides health systems with AI-enabled solutions to engage with patients in ways that have measurable impacts on outcomes. By allowing providers to stay connected to patients throughout the care journey, healthcare organizations can optimize health and financial outcomes while creating a better patient experience. Solutionreach is the leader in patient engagement solutions and innovation. The first to send a text message in healthcare, the company now serves over 25,000 customers and facilitates one billion messages a year to 80 million patients in the U.S.

