Patients who do not comply with recommended care might be more likely to have negative outcomes as a result of their noncompliance. Additionally, patients who exhibit disruptive behaviors might be at an increased risk of misdiagnosis. A recent study shows that when dealing with difficult patients, clinicians are 42 percent more likely to wrongly diagnose a complex medical issue and 6 percent more likely to wrongly diagnose a simple medical issue.¹

Despite the challenges that noncompliant and difficult patients present, healthcare providers can take a number of proactive steps to engage these patients and address potentially problematic behaviors.

- Establish a policy defining the basic rights and responsibilities of each patient. This policy provides a foundation on which to build an effective provider–patient relationship. Display or make this information available to all patients.

- During each patient encounter, emphasize the importance of following the prescribed treatment regimen, even if symptoms subside. Explain the possible consequences of not following the agreed-upon treatment plan.

- Consider patients’ lifestyles and medication costs when prescribing. A variety of situational, geographic, economic, and cultural issues can contribute to issues of noncompliance.

- Use the teach-back, or repeat-back, technique to ensure that patients fully understand the information and instructions provided. Patients from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds may have limited health literacy, which can lead to noncompliance.

- With the patients’ permission, include family members/significant others in education about the importance of following treatment plans. These individuals may help reinforce the importance of compliance.

- Provide noncompliant patients with education about their treatment plans both verbally and in writing — especially if a patient has serious health problems.
If a patient has financial, physical, or emotional limitations that lead to noncompliance, determine whether any community services are available to assist the patient and improve compliance.

Utilize behavior contracts that detail both provider and patient responsibilities relative to the treatment regimen. Both parties should sign the contract.

If a patient is missing appointments, try to determine the reason. Consider transportation, family care, or financial issues that may prevent the patient from keeping appointments.

After several missed appointments, consider sending the patient a letter stressing the importance of keeping the appointments and complying with the treatment plan.

Document missed or cancelled appointments by noting either “patient no-show” or “cancelled” in the patient’s record. If possible, document the reason for a cancellation — e.g., “no transportation” or “child care issues.”

Do not delete original appointment entries, as the appointment log may become a valuable tool if you have to demonstrate a patient’s continued noncompliance with appointments.

Document a description of all clinical noncompliance, as well any education provided to the patient and/or family regarding the consequences of not following the treatment regimen. When documenting noncompliance, use subjective statements from the patient and/or family and objective information obtained through patient encounters.

Avoid disparaging remarks or editorializing when documenting information related to patients’ noncompliant behaviors.