

Using the PHQ 2 and the PHQ 9

A Training Guide for Medical Assistants, Front and Back Office Staff

Depression screening workflows include front desk staff, medical assistants or rooming staff, and other care team members who might not be used to talking with patients about mental health concerns. This guide provides information about your role in screening patients for depression.

What is the Patient Health Questionnaire?

The PHQ 9 is a nine-question form used to screen for signs and symptoms of depression and monitor changes in symptoms. Some responses to the PHQ 9 also prompt providers to assess their patients for their potential risk of suicide.

The PHQ 2 is simply the first two questions of the PHQ 9. It can be used as a preliminary screening tool administered prior to the PHQ 9. If the patient responds “not at all” to both questions on the PHQ 2, no further questions are required.

Screening with the PHQ

The patient’s PHQ 2 and PHQ 9 scores should be recorded at the beginning of a visit, like blood pressure or other vital signs. The PHQ 9 can be filled out in two ways:

Patient completes PHQ on paper form:

- You can directly hand a copy of the PHQ to the patient to complete on their own. The PHQ 9 was developed to be used in this way. Many studies have shown that patients can successfully fill out this form by themselves and do not need your assistance.
- If the patient completes the PHQ 9 on paper, immediately enter the score into the EHR.
- You may be asked to be responsible for alerting the provider if follow up is indicated by the patient’s score.

Rooming staff complete PHQ with the patient:

- Some rooming staff administer the PHQ 2 and PHQ 9 as part of the rooming process, entering the score directly in the EHR.
- If you are administering the PHQ 9 in this way, **it is very important that you ask the questions exactly as written on the form.**
- **Be sure that you do not make the patient feel rushed in any way so as to ensure accurate responses.**
- Make a note in the EHR about why PHQ 9 scores are not available.

Do NOT enter “0” in the EHR if the patient did not complete the PHQ.

Frequent Patient Questions about the PHQ

Patient Question:	Why do I need to fill this out?
Answer	<p>SCREENING 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>FOLLOW-UP (<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>
Patient Question:	If I don’t feel like I have these problems, should I still fill this out?
Answer	<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. [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>
Patient Question:	Do I have to fill this out even if I’m not comfortable answering these questions?
Answer	<p>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.</p>
Patient Question:	I would rather just talk to my provider about these questions instead of filling this out. Is that OK?
Answer	<p>Yes, of course.</p>
Patient Question:	I don’t understand some of these questions. Can you help me?
Answer	<p>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.</p>

