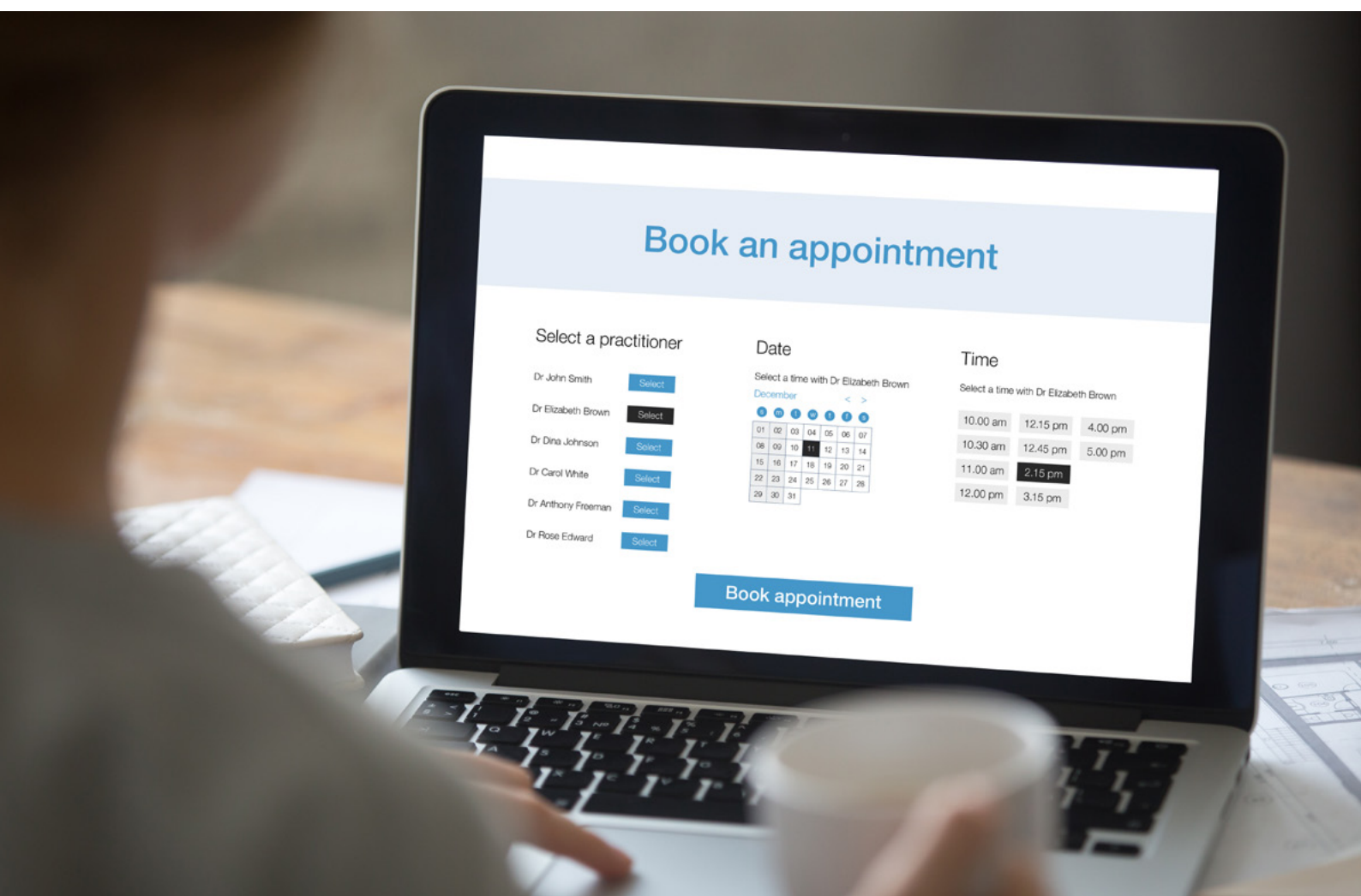


Online appointment systems

Factsheet



Online appointment technology allows patients to book appointments online through internet-connected devices, such as computers, tablets and smart phones.

Online appointment systems may also come with additional features, such as automatic SMS or email appointment reminders and online check-in processes when patients arrive for appointments.

What are the benefits of online appointment systems?

24-hour convenience

Making appointments over the phone usually requires patients to phone in during office hours. Online appointment systems allow patients to book appointments outside of the normal general practice business hours.

Time savings

Online appointment systems mean that the practice team spend less time on phone bookings and managing appointments, allowing them to undertake more patient-focused tasks and potentially improve health outcomes. For patients, online appointment systems can provide more flexibility to book appointments, as they do not need to take time out of their schedule to call their general practice.

Cost savings

The time-saving benefits of online appointment systems can result in cost savings, as staff resources can be directed to other tasks.

Online appointment systems can also reduce patient non-attendance through reminder systems, reducing lost revenue due to non-attendance.

How do I set up an online appointment system for my practice?

There are a number of online appointment systems available on the market and most general practice clinical information systems also provide the technology to set up online appointments as part of the practice management system.

Online appointments via your practice clinical information system

If your current clinical information system offers online appointments it is usually a simple process to set up and publish a 'Book now' option on your website for patient use.

Some of the benefits of using your existing software for online appointments include:

- a fully integrated solution connected to the practice's existing systems
- potential cost savings as new software does not need to be purchased

- reduced training as the practice team is already familiar with the systems
- real-time management of appointments directly into the clinical information system
- easier patient management through the use of current information
- automatic updating of new patient information in the clinical information system.

While offering online appointments via your existing clinical information system have the above benefits, there may be some disadvantages, including:

- placing additional administrative and technical burden on the practice
- the practice team becoming the first point of contact for patients who have difficulty booking online
- the need to manage all technical support by the practice.

Online appointments with an external provider

Using an external provider for your online appointments can offer a number of benefits, including:

- creating more complete solutions by offering everything that is required in one place, including technical support for the practice and for patients
- multi-device booking platforms through the use of apps
- detailed reporting and analytics of booking trends.

Some of the disadvantages of using an external service provider for online appointments include:

- increased costs to create integration with existing systems
- staff training time
- transactional fees
- ensuring the system aligns with your organisational aims (eg advertising content on the external service provider site and the way in which patient data is protected and used by the external service provider).

What else should you consider?

You should consider the following questions before introducing an online appointment system into your practice.

Practice considerations

- What education and awareness is needed for practice staff?
- What impact does booking appointments online have on the existing patient assessment process? The RACGP recommends the use of online appointment systems for routine and non-urgent appointments only. Phone bookings are advised for urgent appointments and appointments that may be more complicated and for other enquiries
- What are the risks for patients who book appointments online? For example, patients who make appointments online, but require more urgent care
- How will the practice manage potential booking errors, double bookings and cancellations by the patient?
- Are all bookings going to be available online or only select numbers? And who is going to decide what appointments will be available?
- How will the performance of the online appointments system be assessed?
- What support or back-up is provided if the online system fails?
- Is the system being continually updated and developed?
- Can the system be easily accessed from desktop computers and mobile devices (is there a mobile app available)?
- Do patients know that they can book appointments online?
- Does the system provide patients with appointment reminders?
- What are the costs (initial and ongoing)?
- How will the success of the online appointment system be evaluated?
- What are the practical challenges of implementing such a system?

Patient considerations

- Will this service be offered to existing patients only or to all patients (including new patients)?
- How is the patient contacted if the GP is unexpectedly unavailable on the day?
- How will your system accommodate varying patient requirements?
- Patients who do not have information technology ability or internet access should continue to have the option of making appointments by phone
- Is the patient comfortable with providing their details to an external service provider?
- If using an external service provider for online appointments, do their privacy and security policies protect patient confidentiality and the use of patient information?