



# How To Stay Ahead of Flu Season Triage Demands

Strategies to Deliver Highly Effective, Dependable, and Affordable Triage Call Services

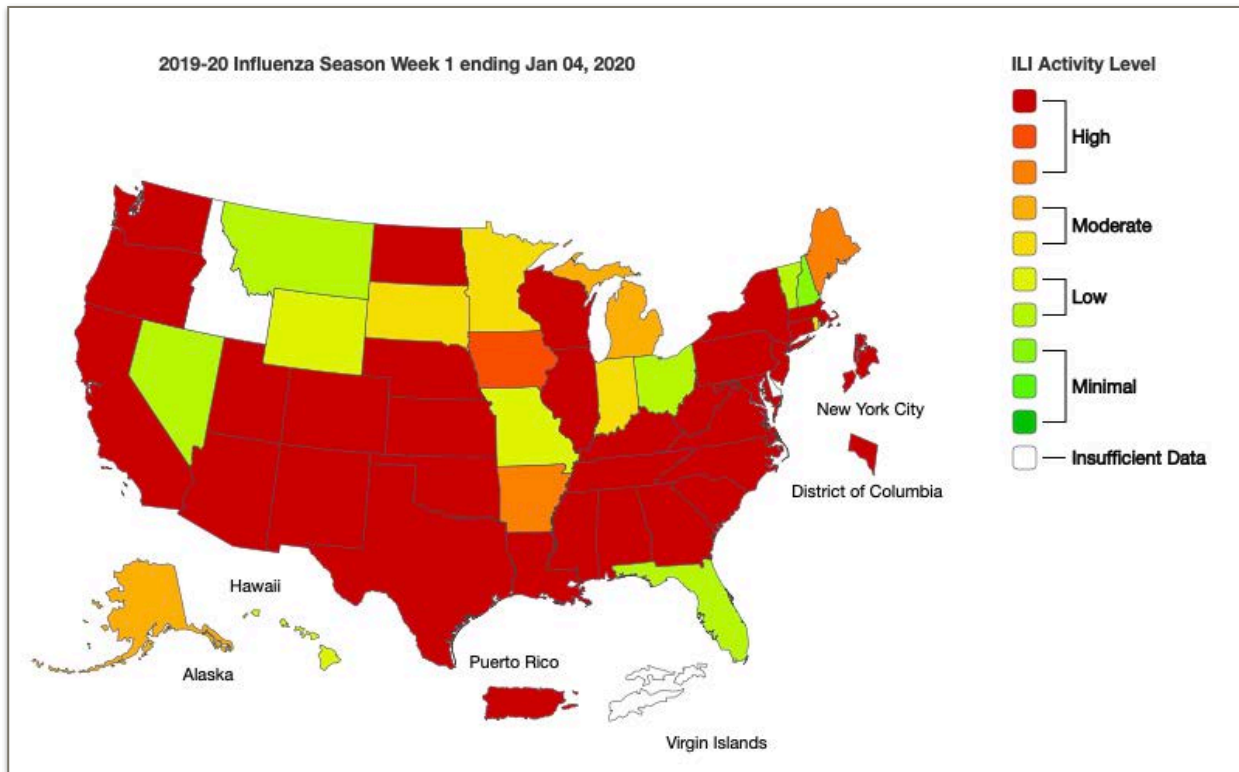
## FLU SEASON IS FULLY UNDERWAY

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Most practices are experiencing notably higher Influenza-related triage calls. The final 2019 CDC [FluView Report](#) showed a dramatic national increase of influenza-like-illness (ILI) from 28 states to 37. More important than the quantity of cases, we've noticed an interesting shift in the types of flu viruses affecting the country.

In most years, type A(H1N1) has been the predominant flu strain at the beginning of the season, followed by a





brief wave of Type B flu at the end. Our analysis of last year's flu season indicated a different pattern. After Type A subsided, Type B greatly overshadowed Type A cases and extended flu season well into March and April of 2019 in many areas.

2020 is also shaping up to be an unconventional year for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is the earliest onset of flu season since 2003. Secondly, Type B/Victoria viruses - not Type A - are now the most common.

We follow these trends and couple them with our 20 years of experience working with nationwide healthcare facilities to draw predictive conclusions.

With these historical and current data points, we can expect a double-impact flu season. In the coming months, Type A will likely come back and extend the wave of illnesses after Type B/Victoria passes. We're in for another tough year.

50%

Call volume increase expected in flu season

Source: Night Nurse historical data

Our decades of data further indicates that triage call volumes will likely increase approximately 50%, with several regions closer to 100%. As ILI cases continue to increase in the coming months, we're engaged in daily conversations with physicians and practice managers about triage strategies that better address patient and staff needs.

Healthcare providers – from small practices to large hospital systems – often struggle to meet the increased demand of their patient populations throughout the day. This demand becomes more challenging after hours when expanded call volumes impair timely patient responses and erode quality of life for physicians.



## TRIAGE OVERLOAD: COMMON WARNING SIGNS

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With patient needs increasing significantly, how effectively are you handling expanded triage call volumes? Consider these common *red flags* and determine if you're prepared to manage this season's influx of activity.

### **Physicians Need a Better Work/Life Balance**

Many doctors are frustrated with reduced quality of life during peak sick seasons. They spend long days with patients then devote much of their evenings to field on-call requests -- missing out on valuable family time. In our ongoing dialog with physicians across the country, we also hear that these concerns are particularly frustrating to the newest generation of doctors, who often place a high value on their work/life balance.

This mirrors data from a recent [American Medical Association \(AMA\) survey](#), finding that 92% of millennial physicians cite work-life balance as a priority - however only 65% are able to currently achieve this balance.

Many leading healthcare providers also believe that reducing physician requirements for nighttime on-call duty serves as both an effective retention tool and a valuable competitive differentiator for attracting top talent in this highly competitive healthcare hiring market.

### **Patient Call Response Times are Increasing**

In addition to reducing morale of overworked physicians – particularly at smaller practices where on-call shifts are all too frequent – the increase of after-hours calls means that patient call response times are often answered less quickly – increasing patient risk and dissatisfaction.



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Source: American Medical Association

Regardless of the season, patient calls must be handled in appropriate time frames to ensure satisfactory outcomes. As a baseline, your physicians should consistently address emergent calls within five minutes, urgent calls within 10 minutes, and approximately 30 minutes for non-urgent calls.

When response times fall outside of these time ranges, changes must be made to increase responsiveness and ensure rapid care. Potential solutions include hiring additional physicians or partnering with a reliable triage provider. For larger practices, increasing the number of on-call physicians throughout flu season may be an option, providing that it doesn't affect the critical work/life balance needs we discussed earlier. For smaller practices where patient panels are supported by fewer physicians, adding more frequent evening shifts may be more challenging.

### **Patients Become Frustrated with Long Wait Times**

When on-call doctors become overwhelmed, patients and their caregivers end up waiting too long for return calls. Most importantly, this reduces the quality of care and can also play a role in patient attrition. Patients count on their chosen healthcare provider for quality care, particularly when needed most, such as flu season.

Delays in patient service - whether via triage calls or office visits - have a direct result on satisfaction. The [2018 Vitals Index](#) reported that 1 in 5 patients have changed their doctor due to long wait times.

Practices that can't meet rapid patient needs often experience reputational damage, particularly with the ability of patients and caregivers to quickly post negative experiences and poor reviews on social media. According to a story by MobiHealth News, [survey data](#) shows that 70% of patients are influenced by these online reviews and comments when selecting a physician.

## You Need to Improve Documentation Practices

In this critical age of complying with “Medical Home,” practices of all sizes are required to demonstrate the continuum of care. When after-hours calls begin to snowball, some physicians quickly scribble notes and move on to the next call, rather than completing necessary contact statements. In many scenarios, incomplete documentation is detrimental to demonstrating Medical Home compliance. Incomplete records can also result in compliance breaches, which all practices want to avoid.



It’s important to capture all critical data in real-time while speaking to patients, creating information-rich encounter

reports that both satisfy reporting requirements and better enable physicians in follow-up appointments. Overworked on-call physicians often find that a well-staffed triage service can address this requirement effectively and efficiently.

If you’re experiencing any of these challenges, it may be time to explore experienced triage providers to increase physician work/life balance, improve patient service delivery and ensure compliant documentation.

## CONSIDERATIONS WHEN EVALUATING TRIAGE PARTNERS

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Outsourced triage providers can improve conditions for your patients and your organization. However, there are many key considerations you must evaluate to select the right partner for your needs. Be sure to ask the following questions and conduct due diligence in these areas:

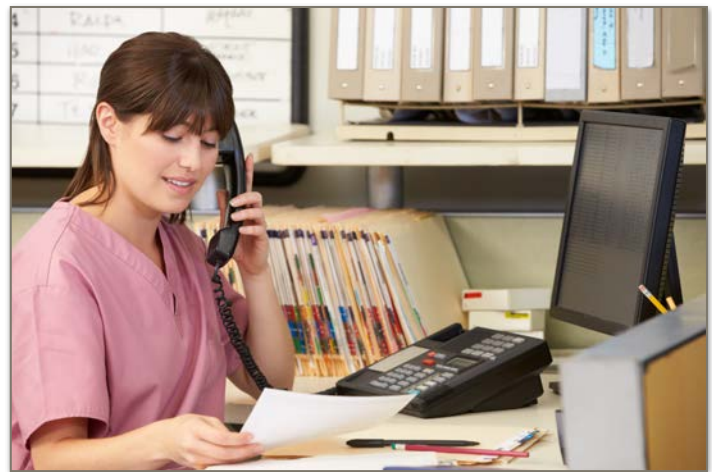
- **How are nurses matched to your patients?** Children have unique healthcare needs - far different from adults and seniors. It’s important to have pediatric nurses handle healthcare for children and adult nurses for older patients. When

examining triage options, choose a provider that has discreet pediatric and adult nursing teams to ensure the most appropriate care for your patients.

- **Are calls answered in the order they arrive or are they prioritized before reaching the RN?** Emergent or urgent calls should always be answered first. This ensures that high-priority patients are never left waiting on the line for less urgent calls.

- **Ensure that nurses are compensated to care, not rush.** When hiring a triage partner, you're trusting your reputation to its nursing staff.

However, some triage providers pay nurses per call, providing incentives to reduce call times and possibly limit the time your patients need. Ensure that your practice is being represented by a triage partner that pays nurses by the hour, not per call. This enables nurses to focus more on caring for your valued patients rather than earning cash incentives.



- **Do they provide highly detailed encounter reports?** Delivering excellent care is just the beginning. You'll need detailed reports to ensure continuum of care and maintain accurate records. Diligently check to ensure that your provider can deliver highly detailed and fully compliant reports before your office opens each morning.
- **Is staffing based on historical data or random hunches?** Ensure that your triage provider is well equipped to meet your needs, especially in peak seasons. A sophisticated triage partner should make staffing decisions based on computer-assisted projections of trending monthly call volume and CDC provided statistics and insights.

- **Are there hidden surcharges?** Know the fee schedules in advance to avoid unexpected invoices. Don't fall victim to rate card variances that will charge you extra for coverage on overnights, weekends and major holidays. Straightforward triage partners will charge the same rate no matter the day, time or occasion. You should not be penalized for using a service when it is most needed.
- **Can the provider deliver reliable service in any condition, including natural disasters?** Seek a triage partner that can ensure always-on operations to guarantee your patients are always well cared for. Ask if the partner has co-located data centers, unlimited electrical power capabilities and 100% uptime across phone, Internet and fax services. Triage providers will need these technical abilities to meet your needs 24/7/365 without exception or circumstance.
- **Can they effectively care for patients in multiple languages?** Providing outstanding care requires that the nurse and the patient can communicate seamlessly without errors. Ensure that the triage partner can provide interpretive services to guarantee effective healthcare for all patients, regardless of their native or preferred language.
- **Can they book appointments for you?** In many cases, the next step for your patients is an office visit to determine next steps. Seek a full-service triage provider that offers next-day appointment scheduling.
- **Do they deliver itemized invoices?** Flu season also creates challenges for every department, including your finance team. Itemized invoices help bookkeepers easily track costs and measure ROI. Choose a triage partner that offers detailed billing statements, including calls and engagements for each physician's patient panel.
- **Is daytime coverage available?** Sometimes, daytime call volume can overwhelm practices. If you could use help handling the burden of flu season daytime calls, see if your provider can relieve office staff and take on daytime triage services to ensure rapid patient response times.



- **How are patient concerns resolved?** Any triage service may deliver a report that needs explanation or clarification. There are times when the patient's recollection of a triage encounter does not match the encounter report received by the physician. Insist on 24/7 manager availability and call recording with better than 99.9% reliability to ensure that triage call concerns or reviews are handled quickly and definitively.
- **Are you protected?** Cybersecurity issues are a reality of today. We hear all the time about healthcare data ransoms and breaches. Make sure your chosen provider employs 24/7 managed firewalls and carries both Professional Liability and Cyber Insurance. These are costly measures, but are essential to protecting your patients' PHI.

If your practice is ready to engage with a triage provider, evaluate the options carefully and select the partner that will best meet the needs for your business, your staff and the specialized needs of your patients.

## ABOUT NIGHT NURSE

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Since 1999, Night Nurse has specialized in delivery of reliable triage services for the medical community. With more than 20 years of experience, we're currently serving thousands of private practice physicians, clinics, hospitals and educational institutions across the country.

We provide reliable, highly effective and affordable triage care 365/24/7. Night Nurse has no minimum charges. Our straightforward rates are the same rate no matter the day, time or occasion. You only pay for the services you use, and the rates remain the same when you need our services the most, such as busy flu seasons, nights and weekends.

Contact us to learn how we can meet your needs. Visit [nightnursetriage.com](https://nightnursetriage.com) for a **Quick Quote**...usually within 24 hours. Speak with a Night Nurse triage specialist at **(508) 650-0022** or email us at [info@nightnursetriage.com](mailto:info@nightnursetriage.com).