



# Best Practices to Prepare for and Operationalize Your Hybrid Care Program

By MedBridge

# Overview

In the current musculoskeletal (MSK) care landscape, patients often have difficulty accessing the care they need in a timely manner due to high demand for services and a current shortage of physical therapists.<sup>1</sup> While digital care offers a convenient solution for lower acuity patients or those needing treatment quickly, some digital care solutions pull patients out of their local healthcare ecosystems, siloing them in ways that can disrupt the patient-provider relationship.

As a result, hybrid care is becoming increasingly popular as a way to combine the best aspects of in-person visits and digital care into a single holistic solution. High-quality hybrid care programs allow clinics to triage patients according to risk level, schedule them more easily, and provide faster access to care, all while increasing touchpoints with clinicians along the way.

But for many providers, switching to a new care program can be daunting. That’s why we’ve created this roadmap to help you navigate that process.

**In this guide we’ll cover:**

- The important advantages of providing hybrid MSK care.
- How to prepare your organization for hybrid care implementation.
- Best practices for operationalizing hybrid care across your teams.

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## The Problem: In-Person MSK Care Can Be Expensive and Hard to Access

From low back and knee pain to chronic osteoarthritis, unexpected injuries, and surgical rehab, musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions are common, pervasive, and on the rise. In fact, approximately 1.71 billion people worldwide are currently living with MSK conditions—a number that has been rapidly increasing due to population growth and aging.<sup>2</sup>

MSK conditions are the leading contributor to disability worldwide, with low back pain the single leading cause in 160 countries and arthritis the primary factor in the U.S.<sup>4,5</sup> Patients face limited mobility and dexterity, which can lead to leaving the workforce earlier than desired, lower levels of well-being, and reduced ability to participate in society.

On top of that, MSK disorders are expensive to treat, costing the U.S. healthcare system a grand total of over \$380 billion—more than any other category of care.<sup>6</sup> According to the CMS 2023 National Health Expenditure (NHE) Fact Sheet, the NHE grew 4.1 percent to \$4.5 trillion in 2022, and 12 to 14 percent of all healthcare spending went to MSK care.<sup>7</sup>

The need for timely, high-quality, and cost-effective MSK care is very real—at a time when the industry is facing a shortage of physical therapists and other MSK providers. According to survey data collected by the American Physical Therapy Association, the job vacancy rate for PTs in outpatient settings is 17 percent.<sup>8</sup> Wait times are generally long across the U.S., with many patients waiting weeks or months for appointments while facing ongoing pain or a disabling injury.<sup>9</sup> In addition, barriers to in-person care such as the inability to take time off from work, a lack of childcare, and living in a rural area can prevent patients from seeking care at all.



**50%**

In the U.S., 1 in 2 adults report an MSK condition each year.<sup>3</sup>



## Understanding Hybrid MSK Care

For MSK care, fully in-person care and fully virtual care both have drawbacks. When clinics offer only in-person care, patients face longer wait times, grow disengaged between sessions, and have trouble making all of their appointments—potentially falling behind with their progress. At the same time, fully virtual appointments don't allow for hands-on care and often remove the local provider from the picture altogether.

That's why the hybrid healthcare model is becoming increasingly popular. Hybrid care takes the best aspects from both in-clinic and digital care and combines them into a single, highly effective care program. With hybrid care, each model's strengths fill in the gaps left by their counterpart's weaknesses for a comprehensive solution that can help patients across the MSK care spectrum get the right level of care at the right time.

Hybrid care works by drawing on technology for virtual sessions, patient monitoring and progress tracking, patient education, automated reminders, and home exercises while incorporating regular in-person care as needed. Virtual care consultations can be offered as a standalone option for low-risk patients or as a supplement to in-person care, helping to bridge the gap between sessions.

While lower acuity patients can benefit from independent care programs, moderate to higher acuity patients need a more hands-on approach but will still benefit from communication and engagement between clinic visits.



# 61%

of patients would consider switching to a provider who offers digital care.<sup>11</sup>



# Understanding Hybrid MSK Care

## Continued

### Key Benefits of Hybrid Care

Hybrid care offers many benefits for patients, providers, and organizations, including:

#### For Patients

- **Improved access to care** due to shorter wait times, better communication with providers between visits, and engaging online programs.
- **Personalized care** made possible by evidence-based, easily customizable programs.
- **Cost savings** as the result of fewer in-person visits.

#### For Providers

- **Optimized workload** because of streamlined workflows at the point of care and the ability to assign home exercise programs more easily and quickly.
- **Data-driven insights** to support more effective care decisions.
- **Stronger therapeutic alliance** arising from easier and more frequent communication with patients.

#### For Organizations

- **Better care delivery** with the ability to manage higher volumes of patients more effectively.
- **Higher patient satisfaction ratings** in response to a better patient experience and higher quality of care.
- **Higher reimbursements** due to meeting key value-based care benchmarks and increased capacity for higher acuity patients and new evaluations.

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**Learn How Hybrid Care Is  
Helping One Organization Drive  
Ongoing Patient Engagement**

[View the Webinar](#)

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# Preparing Your Organization for Hybrid MSK Care Implementation

## Identify Your Goals

Shifting to a new care platform might not be a walk in the park, but understanding the benefits of doing so and having a step-by-step approach can make the process easier and far less overwhelming. Start by identifying the problems you want to solve with hybrid care. What are the primary pain points in your organization and how can a hybrid care program help?

Some of the most common goals of organizations making the move to digital care include:

- ✓ Optimizing patient programs: providing the best quality of care in the appropriate timeframes
- ✓ Boosting staff efficiency
- ✓ Improving outcomes
- ✓ Increasing patient retention rates
- ✓ Lowering co-pays and deductibles
- ✓ Improving access to care
- ✓ Enhancing the patient experience by delivering the flexibility and convenience that patients expect and ask for
- ✓ Staying competitive as more organizations adopt digital care



# 82%

Once patients get in sync with their digital care program, they see the value. In fact, 82% of patients indicated mobile apps had a positive impact on their ability to engage in exercise activity.<sup>10</sup>

# Preparing Your Organization for Hybrid MSK Care Implementation

Continued

## Assess Your Readiness

### Is your staff on board with digital care?

Especially if clinicians are already working at their capacity, adding another new process or task—even something that will ultimately save them time—can be met with resistance. To facilitate this process, you can improve buy-in by [helping your providers understand](#) how digital care will benefit them—and everyone.

Let your clinicians know that digital care will expand their ability to provide great care, not replace them or distance them from their patients. When they understand how digital tools will free up more time to spend with patients, increase communication, and improve the therapeutic alliance, they'll be more inclined to get on board.

### Is your EMR ready for an integration?

While some hybrid care platforms integrate well with a variety of EMRs such as Epic, Raintree, NextGen, Casamba, and Cerner, others don't. Once you've identified a hybrid care solution that looks like a good fit for your organization, reach out to that company for help determining compatibility. In the meantime, prepare for integration by identifying key technical and operational stakeholders to lead this part of the project and by reviewing your organization's security and change protocol prior to project kickoff.

### What level of care do your patients need?

Get a better idea of how you'll structure your digital care program by assessing the acuity level of your patients. Moderate to higher acuity patients typically need hybrid care that includes more in-person visits, whereas lower acuity patients can be directed toward independent programs, freeing up capacity for patients who need more hands-on care.

### What virtual care services do you currently offer?

Take a look at any virtual care services your organization currently offers and what they entail. Do your providers already follow up with patients outside of the clinic as part of their standard workflow, even if just by email, text, or phone? Does your organization already use digital care tools like telehealth, digital home exercise programs (HEP), and remote therapeutic monitoring (RTM), or will digital care be completely new? If so, identify the smaller steps that you can take now to begin incorporating digital care into your organization.

### Who should lead the initiative?

Bring your program to life by creating a virtual care team that includes the following roles:

- Virtual Care Director
- Clinician Lead (Physical Therapist)
- Digital Health Specialist
- IT Support Specialist
- Patient Care Coordinator
- Quality Improvement Specialist
- Regulatory and Compliance Officer

# Preparing Your Organization for Hybrid MSK Care Implementation

## Continued

### Choose Your Platform

#### Identify Your Pain Points

Once you have a virtual care team in place, work together to determine what services to provide based on your organization's needs, values, and goals. Ask questions such as:

- Are there holes in your current patient engagement program that cause patients to fall through the cracks and lose motivation?
- Are your current patient engagement workflows time consuming and cumbersome for providers?

After identifying your most pressing pain points, look for a hybrid care solution that can best solve them.

#### Find the Right Solution

With hybrid care, organizations can create a layer of digital technology that spans the entire patient journey. Virtual care consultations can be offered as a standalone option or as a supplement to in-person care, making these ideal for low-risk interventions as well as check-ins along the way. Once a patient is in the system, digital tools like virtual care visits, remote monitoring, patient messaging, and patient portals provide new opportunities for engagement that help bridge the gap.

Keep in mind that while many third-party digital care solutions can vastly improve the quality and efficiency of care delivery, not all of them are designed to be used in tandem with in-person visits. As a result, they can silo patients in a way that disconnects them from their care team. By using a high-quality hybrid care solution that complements in-person visits, you can improve patient rapport, connection, and satisfaction.

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**4 in 5 patients want to use digital tools when managing their healthcare experience.<sup>12</sup>**



## Operationalizing Hybrid MSK Care

Once you have your hybrid care program planned out and ready to implement, here are some key best practices across three important areas—staff training, patient onboarding, and ongoing monitoring and support—for helping your program succeed.

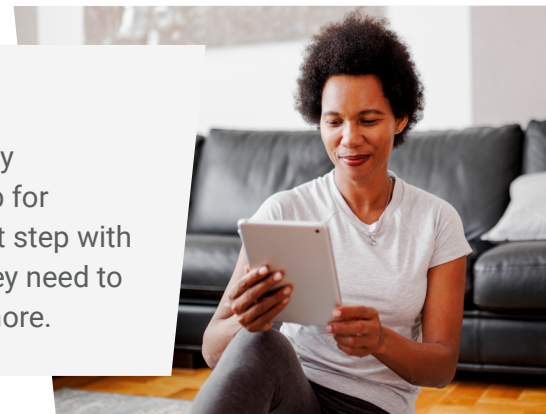
### Staff Training and Development

Equip your team with the necessary skills and knowledge to deliver hybrid MSK care effectively by:

- Creating a solid foundation with high-quality training focusing on topics such as how to onboard patients with their digital care program and how to engage them virtually.
- Keeping digital care top of mind by offering ongoing shorter-format courses.
- Upskilling staff and providing career growth opportunities with advanced resources.

### **Build Expertise with the MedBridge Digital Health Academy**

The Digital Health Academy is MedBridge’s comprehensive training library containing hours of material you can easily assign to staff to set them up for success with digital care. Built for staff members looking to take the next step with digital care, our complete training programs give clinicians everything they need to become experts in motivational interviewing, telehealth treatment, and more.





# Operationalizing Hybrid MSK Care

## Continued

### Patient Onboarding and Education

Whether your patients are new to digital care or have used it before, these best practices will help them get started with your organization's program:

- **Explain how digital care will help.** Share with your patients the benefits they'll receive from participating in digital care, such as the opportunity to communicate more often with their provider, better guidance between sessions, and greater convenience and flexibility.
- **Set expectations.** Give patients an overview of what to expect from their care plan and how digital care will factor into it. For example, if you're using RTM and need your patients to log their exercises on a regular basis, be upfront about this process and provide clear instructions.
- **Practice reflective listening.** Your patients will likely have questions! Use short, reflective listening responses to make sure their concerns feel heard.

### Monitoring and Support

To optimize your digital care program, be sure to:

- Set up systems for tracking patient adherence and progress.
- Ensure that clinicians and patients are able to easily provide feedback on their experience.
- Make adjustments as needed to ensure that patients are receiving the right level of care and that processes are running as smoothly as possible for everyone involved.

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#### Want more tips for engaging patients in digital care?

Check out our infographic [9 Best Practices for Engaging Patients in Their Digital Care Program](#)



## MedBridge Pathways Makes It Easier to Operationalize Hybrid Care

[MedBridge Pathways](#) is our new digital MSK care platform, purpose-built to keep therapy at the forefront of care and help organizations deliver superior patient outcomes across the musculoskeletal care spectrum. By supplementing existing in-person programs with a variety of digital care pathways based on patient acuity, Pathways can help you get your MSK patients to the right level of care faster.

These standardized pathways can be personalized to take into account patients' pain, goals, and activity levels. Patients are guided through exercises by evidence-based progression criteria in multiple phases:

- Engaging video, text, and interactive education provide a guide for the patient, supporting them throughout their rehab journey.
- Gamification and data-driven progress tracking motivate patients to complete their program.
- Periodic surveys and PROs are collected to help measure progress, identify red flags, and manage progression.

With MedBridge Pathways, an easy-to-navigate patient-centered design and leading-edge functionality like digital triage and motion capture help engage patients and give providers powerful insights into patient status and progress.

Unlike other third-party digital care solutions, MedBridge Pathways is designed to support existing providers—not replace them. Instead of taking patients out of an organization's care ecosystem, Pathways allows the patient to remain within it, enabling clinicians to meet patients where they are in their continuum of care in their own communities.

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## ABOUT MEDBRIDGE

Combining powerful digital patient care tools with the highest quality education, MedBridge is committed to making healthcare better for both providers and patients. Organizations across the care continuum use MedBridge to provide an enriched, digitally enabled experience that engages patients while streamlining and simplifying care. Designed with over a decade of insight from more than 300,000 clinicians and 25 million patients, MedBridge has helped thousands of organizations realize better patient outcomes. [Learn more.](#)

See how MedBridge can help your organization. [Contact us to request a demo.](#)