Managing Health Conditions During COVID-19

You've surely heard recommendations about how to reduce your risk for COVID-19. And doctor's offices, clinics and hospitals have new rules to help us stay safe too. So how should we best manage health conditions right now? When should we see a doctor? If we go to a doctor's office, how can we stay safe? Should we consider virtual visits instead?

In this article, we'll explore some specific tips and recommendations.

Certain groups are at higher risk for COVID-19.

Older adults and those with serious medical conditions are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. Some of the high-risk conditions that are important to manage are:

- Chronic lung disease such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF) and cystic fibrosis (CF).

- Cardiovascular disease such as congestive heart failure (CHF), congenital heart disease, hypertension, coronary artery disease (CAD) and cerebrovascular disease.

- Diabetes, chronic kidney disease and liver disease.

- Medications or conditions that compromise the immune system. This includes cancer treatment, bone marrow or organ transplant, HIV or AIDS, and high-dose chronic steroids.

- Obesity, in particular a body mass index >40.

If you have one of these health conditions, it's especially important to avoid exposure to COVID-19. Follow these recommendations:

- Follow local guidelines.

- Avoid contact with people who are sick. Also stay away from people who have recently traveled to an area with high COVID-19 activity.

- Avoid crowded spaces.

- If you do need to go out, avoid doing so during peak hours. Stay 6 feet away from others.

- Wash your hands often using soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after you have been in public. If soap and water are not available, clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.

- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth.

- Avoid touching high-traffic surfaces in public. This includes elevator buttons, door handles and shopping cart handles.

- Disinfect your home regularly, especially doorknobs, faucet handles and cellphones.

- Maintain healthy habits to keep your immune system strong. Eat well, get enough sleep and manage your stress levels.

- Use phones and apps to stay connected.

- Quit smoking and vaping. Those who smoke may be at greater risk of developing severe complications from COVID-19.

Make a plan in case you get sick.
- Have enough groceries and household supplies on hand so you could stay home for a few weeks. Consider using online grocery ordering and delivery.

- Make a plan for who will take care of you if you get sick.

Pay special attention to managing your health condition.
- Continue your medications. Take them exactly as prescribed, and do not change your treatment plan without talking to your doctor.

- Have at least a two-week supply of medications. Talk to your doctor about getting an extra supply (ideally a 90-day supply) of prescription medications.

- Monitor your health condition frequently. For example, talk to your provider about at-home blood pressure monitoring, home blood sugar checks or tests of lung function.

- Talk to your health care provider about whether your vaccinations are up to date. People who are at high risk should get influenza and pneumococcal disease vaccines.

- If you have a chronic condition and live alone, ask family members, friends or neighbors to check on you. Ask them to call or contact you through email or social media.

Keep up with your regular appointments. It could prevent a visit to the emergency room later.
- Ask your clinic/provider about virtual care options. Many clinics now offer phone or online visits.

- If you do need to go to a clinic, doctor's office or hospital, wear a mask. Stay 6 feet away from others.

- Call your health care provider if you have any health concerns or think you may have COVID-19. If you need emergency help, call 911.

- Do not delay seeking emergency care for your underlying condition because of COVID-19. Emergency departments have plans to protect you from getting COVID-19.

Consider the following tips for a successful virtual care visit.

- Be on time.

- Treat the virtual visit like any other appointment but have patience. Technology is unpredictable, so there may be glitches.

- Write down your symptoms, existing conditions, medications and questions ahead of time.

- Find a quiet location with good lighting for your visit.

- Make sure the device you are going to use is charged with a strong signal.

- Have a flashlight nearby in case you need it to show the provider a clear view of your sore throat, mouth problem or skin problem.

- Put medical devices that you use close at hand.

- Be ready for an in-person follow-up appointment. This is necessary in certain cases.