



How to Navigate Your Medical Appointments Safely in Person or through Telehealth

We have spent months at home doing our part to “flatten the curve,” while life as usual was essentially put on hold. As businesses and medical practices have slowly and cautiously reopened, many appointments can resume, with new mitigating strategies in place to make it safe for everyone involved. But how do you know what is safest for you and your loved one? What steps do you take to attend in person medical appointments and can telemedicine play a role?

Medical offices are proactively taking steps to begin to see patients in person. Here’s how to prepare for a medical appointment when an office visit is needed:

- Call the office or check the provider’s website to learn the safety precautions they have put into place. Many are having patients call before entering, to avoid having too many people in their waiting room, so don’t arrive too early or too late. Understand their protocol regarding a family member or caregiver being allowed to accompany the patient.
- Wear appropriate PPE, including a face mask covering. Wash your hands before you leave home and avoid touching your eyes, nose and face. Wear gloves if needed.
- Use revolving doors when available and try not to touch hard surfaces.
- Be prepared to follow up through a telehealth visit if that is a possibility.

Telehealth

When scheduling your appointments, you may be asked if you prefer to use telehealth as an option. In order for the telehealth appointment to be conducted and approved by insurance, the physician must use an interactive audio and video telecommunications system that permits real-time communication with the patient at home. You can receive this via your smart phone or laptop, whichever is easiest for you to manage.

Many doctors will ask you to download a specific app like Zoom and to be able to log into to their online portal for access to the link. It is always a good idea to test this link, along with your computer or phone’s video and speaker each time, to ensure the technology is working.

Use the same guidelines as you would for a normal office visit, to ensure this time is most beneficial, and you receive all the necessary information to move forward. Below are some helpful hints from Kevin Baran, MD, MPH, HMDC, ProHealth Physicians and Medical Director of McLean Hospice, to make the most out of your medical appointment or telehealth.

1. Prepare for the Call / Appointment

- Write down any questions you have ahead of time and have them available, along with a pen and notepad
- Invite another family member to join, so they can hear the information first-hand

2. The Call/ Appointment

- Be relaxed and be honest
- Speak clearly and make sure you are heard
- Be punctual. This is an appointment the doctor has scheduled for you. Like any other appointment, be sure you are punctual, to receive the allotted time

3. Before Ending

- Be sure all your questions are answered and you understand your follow-up instructions and next steps. Repeat the follow-up to the doctor, to ensure you have understood them correctly.
- Don't leave with uncertainty
- Ask for any signs you should watch for
- Obtain new prescription details
- Ask for alternative communication vehicles in case you have additional questions (phone, email, portal, letters)

After the appointment, it is a good idea to keep a journal of the discussion while it is fresh in your mind.

Emergency Care

Do not hesitate to call your primary care physician or specialist when in doubt if you or your loved one needs emergency care or if they may be exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19. For people with dementia, increased confusion is often a primary indication of an illness and they may be able to provide treatment by phone. Symptoms of COVID-19 can also include increased agitation, a sudden sadness, coughing, difficulty breathing fever, chills/ repeated shaking with chills, muscle pains, headache, sore throat, new loss of taste or smell.

Call 911 or visit the Emergency Room if either of you are in acute pain, have a very high fever, have experienced a trauma or have life threatening symptoms; difficulty breathing/chest pain, arm weakness, face drooping, and/or difficulty speaking.

If you do need to take your loved one with dementia to the hospital, consider asking another family member to join you. This will ensure the patient is not alone if you need to take time to explain symptoms to the medical staff and fill out forms. Be sure to tell ER staff that they have dementia. Above all, remain as calm and reassuring to the patient as you can, to reduce their anxiety and confusion.

By having an emergency bag packed ahead of time, you will be better prepared to get out the door quicker and to have the items to assist you at hand. These include: medical and insurance information, list of prescriptions, advance directives, emergency names and numbers, hearing aid and batteries, extra set of glasses if possible, snack/water, warm socks and jacket, comforting objects, toiletries, notepad and pen, list of their particular behaviors.

Being informed and planning ahead of time for routine care and how to handle an emergency, will help you in your role as a caregiver.

Please visit McLeanInspiredLiving.org to view our full safety measures by department, and know your health care providers are doing all they can to keep you safe and healthy.