

Re-Opening America: What Patients Should Know About Seeking Healthcare

As areas of the United States experience a decline in coronavirus disease (Covid-19) cases, healthcare providers and facilities are preparing to re-open to all health care services. During the height of the pandemic, many organizations had postponed non-emergency, non-Covid-19 care in order to ensure capacity to care for Covid-19 patients and to preserve supplies, such as masks and ventilators. Moving forward, hospitals and physicians must be prepared to not only care for Covid-19 patients (including any surge in cases), but also to resume all healthcare that was postponed due to the pandemic. Patients have ongoing medical needs, may require preventive services such as vaccinations, or may have rescheduled surgeries that were postponed due to the public emergency.

As a patient, how do you know when it is safe to return to healthcare facilities, and what should you expect when you do? Ultimately, patients and providers will come together to make the right decision for each patient when addressing their healthcare needs. Below are some recommendations to help guide patients as they consider seeking non-emergency treatment.

1. **Do Not Postpone Necessary Care.** Some patients have been delaying care for chest pains, stroke symptoms, or other signs and symptoms of potentially serious health conditions. Do NOT postpone care that is urgent or may lead to complications such as heart attack or stroke. Also, do NOT postpone necessary preventive care such as immunizations or cancer screening. Do not hesitate to reach out to your provider if you have any questions about when to seek treatment.
2. **Is It Safe to Go to your Doctor or Hospital?** Talk with your healthcare provider about your provider's facilities and the precautions they are putting in place to keep patients safe. Healthcare providers are making preparations to care for you safely. By now, healthcare facilities should have established special procedures for cleaning and disinfecting. They should have updated waiting room guidance and created special places for Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 care within their facilities. All appropriate precautions should be made to ensure that care is as safe as possible for patients.
3. **Consider Telehealth or Virtual Visits.** Patients may receive certain care by "telehealth" – audio or audio/visual care via your phone or computer. This reduces the risk of transmission of Covid-19. Ask your provider if telehealth visits are an option.
4. **What to Expect when you Seek Healthcare.** To prevent you from getting Covid-19, or giving it to others, you may be asked to do the following by your provider:
 - *Wear a face covering.* A facemask helps limit your risk of getting or spreading disease.
 - *Avoid crowded waiting areas.* Sometimes you will be asked to wait in your car until your visit. Waiting rooms should have chairs spaced far apart to keep you and others safe.
 - *Limit visitors or people who go to your appointment with you.* By limiting the number of people, your exposure becomes limited as well. Try to limit visitors or people who accompany you to visits to ONE person. Visitors should also wear a face covering (facemask).

- *Screening before entering a facility.* You, and your visitors, may have your temperature taken, or be asked questions about your health status, before entering a healthcare facility. This is to keep you and others safe.
 - *Wash your hands often.* Use soap and water for 20 seconds, or hand sanitizer when washing your hands is not possible.
5. **Should I get tested for Covid-19 before seeking healthcare?** Discuss with your provider if you should be tested before going for care. In some cases, such as before surgery, childbirth, or a procedure, it may be necessary to be tested for Covid-19. Some people have shown no symptoms for the disease but have been found to be positive. If testing is not available, in some cases, such as before surgery, you may be asked to self-isolate prior to your surgery to reduce the risk that you have Covid-19. If you ARE positive for Covid-19, discuss your options with your provider about the benefits of proceeding or postponing care.

Vulnerable Populations: When Possible, Stay Home. As much as possible, stay home, avoid crowds, and self-isolate. If you are at high risk for complications of Covid-19, it is especially important to stay away from others who may spread it to you. High risk patients, including those with underlying chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney disease, or those who are over 65 years of age, should consider staying home whenever possible. When out in public, be sure to practice social distancing by staying 6 feet away from others.

Healthcare facilities, such as hospitals, doctors' offices, surgery centers and all sites of care are re-opening as appropriate, and as state and local conditions allow. Precautions are being taken to ensure your care is safe and that you are protected. Patients should have confidence in seeking care, and trust that your healthcare providers are doing their best to keep you, your family, and your community safe.