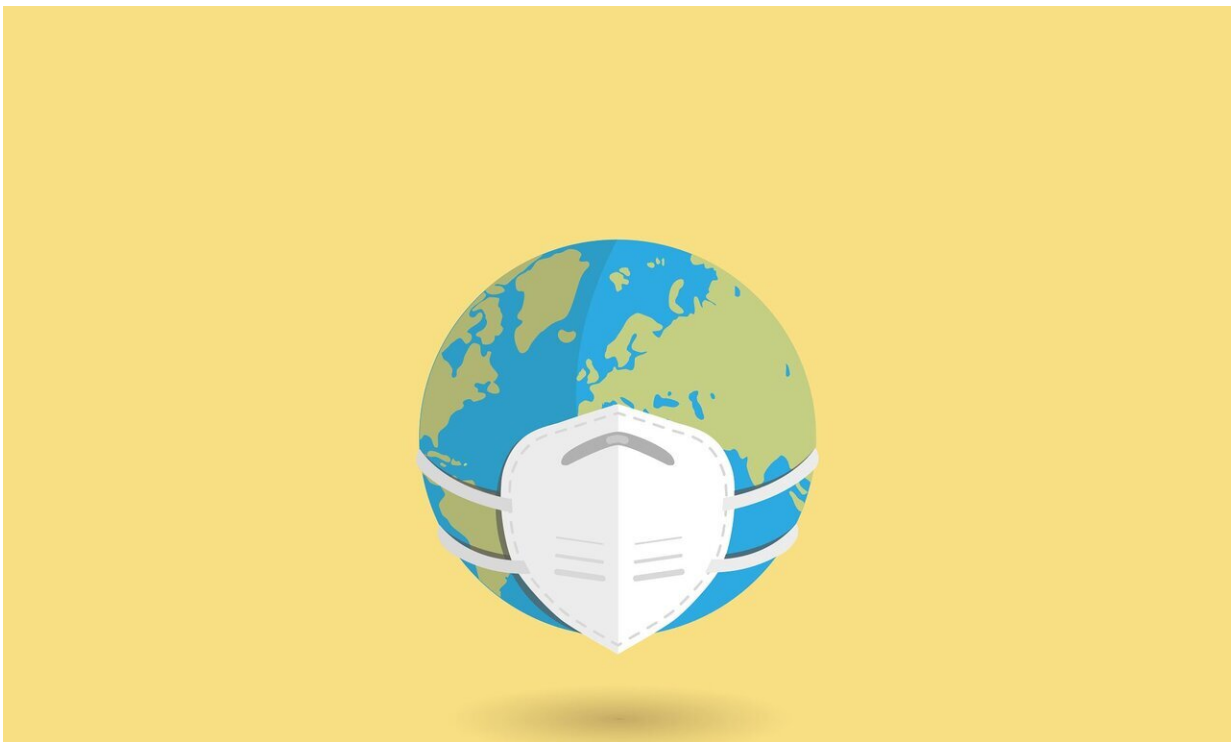


Safety considerations for visiting primary care doctors

October 21 2020, by Patti Verbanas



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The COVID-19 pandemic has left many people with chronic health conditions relying on telemedicine rather than seeing their doctor in person when necessary or putting off important visits entirely because they fear being infected.

Ann M. Nguyen, an assistant research professor at Rutgers Center for State Health Policy at the Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research, who recently [published a paper](#) on [safety measures](#) at [physician offices](#), discusses what people should know about visiting their doctor and why putting off appointments that need to be done in person could lead to other [health](#) problems.

What can patients do to assess the safety of their doctor's office when making an appointment?

The physician's office should be appointment-only and have clear safety protocols posted online, outside of their office or described over the phone. While making an appointment, the office staff should walk patients through those safety protocols, such as asking them to wear a mask to the in-person visit and to come alone unless a companion is necessary for their physical or emotional health. Staff should ask COVID-19 screening questions over the phone. Any information that can be collected over the phone or online, such as insurance information, should be done before the appointment.

What are doctors' offices doing to ensure safety during in-person visits?

Contact is limited as much as possible. Intake forms are completed online or over the phone. Offices offer early-morning appointments for high-risk patients to lessen exposure, discourage or stop walk-in appointments and stagger in-person visits to allow time for rooms and equipment to be cleaned.

Patients wait outside or in their car until the doctor is ready to see them. While they wait, an office staff member asks COVID-19 screening questions and checks their temperature. The office staff member also

offers to do part of the visit at the curbside or in the parking lot if possible, such taking blood pressure. If patients must go into a [waiting room](#), the offices limit the number of people to allow for social distancing. During the visit, office staff and the doctor maintain a six-foot distance when possible. Equipment and rooms are marked as sanitized. Hand sanitizer is available. Everyone in the office is wearing [personal protective equipment](#), including other patients.

What precautions should people take for lab work?

Patients should call labs before booking appointments since many have slowed response times and capacity or have focused on coronavirus testing. People with chronic conditions especially should ask the labs and/or their doctors for tips on the best times to visit and how the lab separates patients seeking routine lab work from those with [appointments](#) for coronavirus testing.

How have doctors' offices otherwise restructured operations for safety?

Following every patient visit, the equipment and examination rooms are sanitized. To reduce contact, offices have set up patient portals for questions. Doctor's office [staff](#) who can perform their jobs at home are not in the office. Also, since primary care clinics need to have a close pulse on their community, they can keep in direct communication with local and state health agencies to monitor evolving conditions.

More information: Ann M. Nguyen et al, Workflow Solutions for Primary Care Clinic Recovery During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Primer, *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* (2020). [DOI: 10.1097/PHH.0000000000001264](https://doi.org/10.1097/PHH.0000000000001264)

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