

# Survey: Americans delaying needed healthcare due to COVID-19

January 12 2021

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Exercise physiologist Nicholas Walker checks Will Fontaine's blood pressure at his cardiac rehab session at the Orlando Health Heart & Vascular Institute. A new national survey by the Orlando Health Heart & Vascular Institute finds many Americans are hesitant to make and keep medical appointments when COVID-19 rates are high. Credit: Orlando Health Heart & Vascular Institute

A new national survey by the Orlando Health Heart & Vascular Institute finds many Americans would delay doctor's appointments and even emergency care when COVID-19 rates are high. The survey found 67 percent of Americans are more concerned about going to medical appointments when COVID-19 rates are high in their area and nearly three in five (57 percent) are hesitant to go to the hospital even for an emergency.

In a time when every trip out of the house and every person we come in contact with poses a threat of contracting COVID-19, it can be difficult to weigh the risks and benefits of venturing out. However, experts say hospitals and doctor's offices are some of the safest public spaces and that delaying medical care can be very dangerous.

"Because of the extensive protocols in place, COVID-19 transmissions in hospitals are very rare," said Joel Garcia, MD, an interventional cardiologist at the Orlando Health Heart & Vascular Institute. "There is more risk in not paying attention to symptoms or medical conditions than the benefit of staying home thinking you will not get exposed to COVID-19."

The survey also found that nearly half (49 percent) of Americans will not reschedule missed in-person medical appointments until COVID-19 concerns are reduced in their area and the same number (49 percent) worry their health will suffer because of in-person appointments missed due to COVID-19.

"I understand their hesitation. But there's no question, across diagnoses, whether for chronic or acute conditions, the later in the disease process that we see people and can intervene, the worse their outcomes." said Steven Hoff, MD, a cardiothoracic surgeon at the Orlando Health Heart & Vascular Institute.

That could have easily been the case for Will Fontaine, who was experiencing fatigue and chest pains, but was hesitant to make an appointment with his doctor.

"At the time, COVID was rampant and I was really trying to limit my exposure," Fontaine said. "Fortunately, one of my co-workers knew Dr. Garcia and we set up a telehealth appointment to talk about my symptoms and the next steps."

Dr. Garcia explained the extensive protocols in place at Orlando Health that made Fontaine comfortable enough to come in for a heart catheterization. The procedure revealed blockages in Fontaine's arteries that would likely lead to a heart attack if left untreated. After successful triple bypass surgery, Fontaine now feels better than he has in years. Five months after surgery, he's down 50 pounds and continues to eat a healthy diet and work hard at his cardiac rehab sessions.

"I promised my doctors that I would change my lifestyle and I have kept that promise," Fontaine said. "I'm just glad I decided to go in for help when I did and that I will be here to spend time with my grandson and to live the life I love."



Joel Garcia, MD, assesses images following a heart catheterization at the Orlando Health Heart & Vascular Institute. Getting patients to come into medical facilities for the procedures they need has been a challenge for doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Credit: Orlando Health Heart & Vascular Institute

Experts say telehealth has become an invaluable tool during the pandemic. Not only do virtual appointments allow doctors to make initial contact with patients, they also offer opportunities to explain the safety protocols in place and encourage them to come in if needed, but, in many cases, they can also be used in follow up care and to limit in-person visits.

"We have been fortunate that we've been able to accelerate the development of telehealth services during the COVID era because of the need that was created," Dr. Garcia said. "Being able to actually reach out to the patient in that venue allows us to educate patients better and get them in the door if we need to see them in person."

Provided by Orlando Health Heart & Vascular Institute

Citation: Survey: Americans delaying needed healthcare due to COVID-19 (2021, January 12)  
retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-01-survey-americans-healthcare-due-covid-.html>

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