

COVID-19 tied to significant increase in outpatient health care

February 14 2024, by Lori Solomon



Outpatient use increases significantly in the month after COVID-19 infection when compared with uninfected individuals, according to a [study](#) published online Feb. 9 in *JAMA Network Open*.

Paul L. Hebert, Ph.D., from the Veterans Affairs Puget Sound Health Care System in Seattle, and colleagues compared outpatient health care use across six categories of care ([primary care](#), [specialty care](#), surgery care, [mental health](#), [emergency care](#), and diagnostic and/or other care) between 202,803 [veterans](#) 'with' and 202,803 veterans 'without' COVID-19 infection (2019 through 2022).

The researchers found that outpatient use in all categories except surgical care was significantly elevated during the peri-infection period for veterans with COVID-19 infection versus the uninfected cohort. There was an increase of 5.12 visits per 30 days across all visit types, predominantly owing to primary care visits (increase of 1.86 visits per 30 days).

While differences in outpatient use attenuated over time, visits remained significantly higher at 184 to 365 days after infection (increase of 0.25 visit per 30 days). Half of the increased outpatient visits were delivered via telehealth.

The greatest increase in utilization was seen for veterans aged 85 years and older (6.1 visits) versus those aged 20 to 44 years (4.8 visits). Increases were also greater for unvaccinated veterans (4.5 visits) versus vaccinated veterans (3.2 visits).

"These results suggest long-term impacts of COVID-19 infection on outpatient health care use and highlight the important role of telehealth in the delivery of primary care to veterans with COVID-19 infections," the authors write.

More information: Paul L. Hebert et al, Changes in Outpatient Health Care Use After COVID-19 Infection Among Veterans, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.55387](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.55387)

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Citation: COVID-19 tied to significant increase in outpatient health care (2024, February 14)
retrieved 28 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-02-covid-significant-outpatient-health.html>

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