Take Advantage of Virtual Doctor Visits

The spread of Coronavirus infections in the United States has caused many people in the country to be concerned that they may have contracted the illness. The timing of Coronavirus's spread coincides with the flu season, which is compounding the strain on medical facilities, since both illnesses have the same basic symptoms. People experiencing cold and flu symptoms are seeking the reassurance of a negative diagnosis for Coronavirus, when normally they might just wait out their illness at home.

Medical facilities are struggling just trying to diagnose those patients for whom doctors have deemed examination or testing necessary. People who are worried that they have contracted Coronavirus from a coworker, classmate, or friend are also seeking medical reassurance, which is resulting in crowded medical facilities. Many people who are experiencing cold- or flu-like symptoms and think they may have contracted Coronavirus are confused about the safety of visiting crowded facilities full of other sick people, and whether their symptoms will be considered severe enough to receive attention.

Fortunately, many health plans include some form of virtual visits or telemedicine, which can ensure that those who are concerned that they may have contracted Coronavirus can consult with a physician, while avoiding exposure to crowds of sick people and reducing the burden on medical facilities. Many of these services include options for phone calls with a doctor, FaceTime calls, or other videoconferencing doctor visit options. Many of these services are available 24 hours each day, with wait times far shorter than those for in-person visits.

Often, healthcare plans will provide telemedicine options to their members with no copay, and several have waived charges for Coronavirus-related visits. People with mild symptoms, or with cold- or flu-like symptoms are encouraged to take advantage of virtual doctor visits, which will provide them with directions for recovery, and instructions for what to do if their symptoms do not improve in a set period of time. These virtual visits will help minimize crowding in medical facilities, which can help minimize the spread of both the flu and coronavirus. Doctors will advise any patients displaying symptoms requiring immediate attention to get to an appropriate medical facility equipped to handle their condition. For most types of virtual visits, doctors can send prescriptions for all non-pain medications to a pharmacy of the patient's choice.

Several telemedicine platforms have seen significant increases in utilization in the last two weeks, with some platforms reporting increases of over 30% in daily utilization. With many workers already working remotely as a result of precautions for Coronavirus taken by their employers, as well as the concerns of being in crowded spaces, the concept of consulting with a physician remotely is becoming more accepted. This shift is a marked change from attitudes in 2017, when a survey by Avizia found that nearly two-thirds of consumers have never used telemedicine services. This was found to be attributable to the fact that two-thirds of the survey respondents did not know if telemedicine services were covered under their healthcare plans.

Plan members can research their own health plan's offerings, but it is a good idea for employers to make employees aware of any telemedicine or virtual visit options provided by their company health plan. Taking advantage of these options can save money, reduce time off needed by employees to consult with a physician, and prevent unnecessary exposure to crowds of sick people. Several of the major telemedicine platforms are website or app-based, and employees should be encouraged to set up their accounts and familiarize themselves with the platform's app or website before they are sick.

In addition to virtual doctor visits, employees can also conduct work meetings from home. In response to Coronavirus causing companies to encourage their employees to work from home, several tech companies are offering free access or upgraded access to their videoconferencing services. Google, Microsoft, LogMeIn (which runs GoToMeeting), Cisco Webex, and Zoom are all offering free use of their videoconferencing platforms, or access to premium features during the Coronavirus outbreak.

The most important benefit of virtual doctor visits is that they make consulting with a physician more convenient, which means that more people will have medical issues addressed at earlier stages. Getting medical attention earlier during an illness results in easier, less expensive, and more effective treatment, which gets patients back to work earlier, and helps reduce healthcare costs for employers and employees. Combined with the new federal rule that will soon allow patients to download their health records and healthcare data onto their smartphones, the app-based convenience of virtual doctor visits and cost savings of telemedicine have the potential of changing the way Americans address their health concerns and receive medical care.

Resources:

Washington State Department of Health Coronavirus news –
https://www.doh.wa.gov/Emergencies/Coronavirus

Center for Disease Control "What You Should Know" Coronavirus information –
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/index.html

Center for Disease Control Guidance for Businesses: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/guidance-business-response.html

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission – https://www.eeoc.gov/facts/pandemic_flu.html