

HEALTHY LIVING :: WOMEN'S HEALTH

# Medical Care in the time of COVID

Ongoing health challenges persist in a pandemic world, doctors warn

by Julia Browning and Kathy Grey



Health fears surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic abound, among them contracting the virus, unknowingly passing it to someone else and suffering the virus' long-lasting effects. "COVID-19 disease is incredibly damaging. It is not just a respiratory illness. Every organ in the body is pretty much affected, including the brain," says Dr. Lindita Hobdari, of Hobdari Family Health in Naples. "Not treating chronic problems of diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease ..." Hobdari says, "carries an increased risk of multisystem organ failure because of the potential for serious complications from COVID-19."

But COVID-19's direct effects aren't the only health concerns the population should be worried about. One dangerous response people have had to the pandemic is postponing routine doctor visits.

"People need to remember that normal health risks don't go away during a pandemic," says boardcertified breast surgeon with 21st Century Oncology, Dr. Elizabeth Arguelles. "Routine screenings and routine appointments are there for a reason."

Hobdari agrees that routine screenings are vital. Ongoing concerns about weight gain, depression, anxiety and insomnia can be addressed, as can potentially life-threatening concerns, with routine exams and testing.

Health issues, such as cancer, heart attack and diabetes, are going to happen, pandemic or not, Arguelles says. That's why it's important not to postpone your scheduled mammogram, for example. The earlier cancer is detected, the easier it is to treat and potentially cure.

"One in eight women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime with absolutely no risk factors. That's a lot of women," Arguelles says, adding that age, family history and hormones increase the likelihood. "Delaying the screening simply means we'll find the cancer later."

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In consideration of the safety measures doctors like Arguelles have implemented in their practices — deep and frequent sanitization, distance requirements and required masks, among them — Arguelles views the risk of contracting the virus as low.

"In the medical community, we deal with illness all the time," Arguelles says. "We understand what contagious diseases are, so we've taken a lot of steps to increase patient and employee safety and awareness."

Telemedicine appointments are increasingly popular for a number of reasons. Both Arguelles' and Hobdari's practices offer such appointments, as does Dr. Cyndi Yag-Howard, a board-certified dermatologist who sees telemedicine as a viable option.

"Teledermatology has been really helpful in my practice because it helps people determine whether it is worth the risk to go to the office or not," Yag-Howard says, adding that a lesion can be looked at to determine if it requires a visit.

Because of skin cancer's prevalence, avoiding the dermatologist's office is a serious risk, she says. With one in five people developing skin cancer by age 70, and with melanoma being particularly deadly, a dermatologist appointment is not to be avoided.

"The risk/benefit ratio is something to take into account," Yag-Howard says. "At this point, the risk of allowing your skin cancer to grow is much greater than your risk of coming into the office."

Another screening that is dangerous to skip is a colonoscopy, says Dr. Mazen Albeldawi, a gastroenterologist at NCH Healthcare System.

Colonoscopy screenings have decreased 30 to 40% in the last six months, Albeldawi says, setting the nation up for a crisis within a crisis.

Despite colorectal cancer being one of the few preventable cancers, 53,000 people died of it in 2019 — cases that could have been addressed early with a routine colonoscopy.

"It's important for people to understand that this is a preventative test," Albeldawi says. "We know that colorectal cancer often has no symptoms, which is why screening is so important."

## **DOCTORS' ORDERS**

The COVID-19 virus is still among us, the doctors warn.

"'Prevention is preferable to cure' is our motto," Hobdari says. "The goal is to never get COVID-19, even the weakest form of it. Vitamin C and zinc help, but please," she implores, "wash your hands, wear your mask and practice social distancing."

Having a healthy immune system is critical in the event one contracts COVID-19, making it more important than ever to embrace healthy lifestyles.

"The most important thing is to try and stay healthy," Arguelles points out, by eating healthy foods, getting enough sleep, doing things to reduce stress and making time to exercise.

Because people are spending more time at home, they're likely living a less active lifestyle than before. An increased exercise routine can balance that out, Arguelles says.

"The other thing is people want to think about how much alcohol they're drinking, because when you're home, it's easier," Arguelles says. "But if you do increase your alcohol intake, you can increase your weight, as well as depression."

Increased alcohol consumption and weight gain are also risk factors for many cancers, including colorectal, says Albeldawi, adding that smoking and excessive red or processed meat should also be avoided to reduce risk.

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Yag-Howard notes that this is a good time to take care of your skin. Though she most often recommends a morning routine of cleanser, toner, a vitamin C product, moisturizer and sunscreen as well as a nightly routine of cleanser, toner, a retinol product and moisturizer, she encourages people to tweak the regimen to make it their own.

"It's a great time to figure out what works for you," Yag-Howard says. She encourages people to take advantage of this time by calling the dermatologist for suggestions.

It's also a good time to face the possibility of a "twindemic," Hobdari



advises, referring to flu season with the COVID-19 reality still among us.

"Vaccination campaigns against flu this year will reduce the risk of simultaneous influenza and COVID-19 outbreaks in the autumn/winter season," Hobdari says.

## FOLLOW THE RULES

If you're concerned about your health during the COVID-19 pandemic, adhere to the guidelines, Arguelles says.

"In order to stay healthy, you should be following guidelines of social distancing and wear a mask that covers both your nose and mouth in closed public spaces," she says, in

addition to avoiding unnecessary travel and practicing good hand hygiene by washing frequently with soap and water.

Hobdari echoes the wisdom: "It's that simple."

"If everyone is participating and following the guidelines, your risk is minimal," Arguelles says.

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