

How to adapt chronic disease management during Covid-19

Covid-19 poses new challenges in self-management to patients who have ongoing chronic care needs, from disruptions in their in-person care to exacerbated psychosocial needs.

In this brief, we outline five actions health systems and frontline staff can take to equip patients with chronic diseases to manage their conditions through the crisis.

System-level support

- Reconsider who your “high priority” patients are
- Determine criteria frontline staff can use to match patients to the appropriate type of care

Frontline staff support

- Equip patients to continue self-managing remotely during Covid-19
- Make sure patients know where to turn for support, remotely and in person
- Connect patients to existing support for their psychosocial needs

System-level support for patients with chronic diseases

Revisit your organization’s approach to account for disruptions and delays in care due to Covid-19. Below, two ways to right-size your support for patients with chronic conditions during this time.

▶ Reconsider who your “high-priority” patients are

Prioritize [outreach](#) to patients who may face exacerbated barriers to self-management as a result of Covid-19 including:



Patients in high-risk and -cost areas

Geotargeting can be used to identify at-risk patients in geographic areas facing significant job loss, housing instability, or a high incidence of Covid-19 cases.



Patients with behavioral health needs

[Early findings](#) indicate that the Covid-19 crisis can exacerbate mental health symptoms. Patients with behavioral health diagnoses may also experience disruptions in their treatment. Both make self-managing chronic conditions more difficult.



Patients who aren’t “showing up”

Reach out to patients who unexpectedly or repeatedly cancel virtual or phone check-ins with their care team. Monitor patients for other deviations from care, like failing to pick up prescriptions or complete lab work.

▶ Determine criteria for frontline staff to match patients to the appropriate type of care

Distinguish which form of care (*phone consults, video visits, office visits, remote patient monitoring, home visits, etc.*) is appropriate for patients seeking care based on their needs. Then, share criteria widely with frontline staff so they can triage patients appropriately.

Sample factors to assess visit type for patients with chronic diseases

- Clinical risk for Covid-19 based on existing diagnoses
- Risk of escalating chronic disease symptoms without intervention
- Risk of exposure to Covid-19 based on geographic location and job type
- Patient engagement with their chronic disease care
- Comfort with, and access to, technology with video capabilities

Source: Advisory Board interviews and analysis..

Frontline staff support for patients with chronic diseases

Covid-19 has drastically changed the way frontline staff interact with patients day to day. And in many cases, the epidemic has altered patients' needs and ability to self-manage.

Below, we've highlighted three ways staff can better understand the impact Covid-19 is having on their patients and bolster support as needed.

▶ Equip patients to continue self-managing remotely during Covid-19

When communicating with patients, dedicate time to understand the impact Covid-19 is taking on their life and ability to manage their condition.

Educate patients on steps they can take to protect themselves and address "FAQs"

- Underscore the importance that patients maintain their care plan regimen to sustain their health and prevent avoidable acute care.
- Outline steps patients can take to protect themselves from Covid-19, such as wearing a mask in public, washing their hands frequently, and practicing social distancing.
- Share "FAQs" in the moment to dispel any misinformation patients may have heard. Some of the most common patient questions include:
 - *How can I tell if I have Covid-19 symptoms? If I feel sick, who should I call?*
 - *Is it OK for me to visit my family members?*
 - *Is it safe to go to a grocery store? To order food to my house?*
 - *Are there any home remedies to decrease the chance I will contract Covid-19?*
- Encourage patients to turn to credible sources such as the [CDC](#) and [WHO](#) if new questions arise.

Surface any new challenges to medication adherence

Medication adherence has historically been one of the top challenges patients face while managing their chronic diseases, and Covid-19 has made it increasingly difficult for many patients to access medications and stick to a daily routine.

Use the questions below to uncover any new barriers to medication adherence:

- *Tell me about your daily medication schedule. Has anything changed over the past few weeks?*
- *Are you able to get all of your prescriptions filled?*
- *Are you able to pick up your medication refills earlier than normal during Covid-19?*
- *Are you able to access mail order or drive-through pharmacy options? If not, can I help you set these options up?*
- *Some patients have heard conflicting information about the medications they take and their risk for getting Covid-19. Right now, we're recommending patients continue their normal medication routine. Are there any concerns you have that I can address?*
- *Can I walk you through how to schedule a remote visit if you need more assistance?*

▶ Make sure patients know where to turn for support, remotely and in person

To reduce disruptions in care, widely promote available options for support on your website, in emails to patients, and during check-ins and visits.

- **For ongoing support:** Ensure patients who had to cancel or postpone in-person visits due to office closures have the option of scheduling a virtual visit.
- **For in-the-moment support:** Direct patients to [remote channels](#), like a triage phone line, if they need assistance. Once a staff member addresses immediate concerns, they can help patients schedule a virtual visit as needed.
- **For urgent needs:** Make sure patients know where to go in case they have to seek emergency care. If you have designated “clean” sites, encourage patients to go to those locations for in-person care.

To ensure patients don’t delay necessary care due to concerns about contracting Covid-19, [communicate precautions](#) you’ve taken to protect patient safety, such as: testing and screening protocols, universal masking for staff and patients, and physical distancing in your facilities.

▶ Connect patients to existing support for their psychosocial needs

Take steps to support patients with [psychosocial needs](#) that have been exacerbated by Covid-19. In addition to the challenges below, patients’ employment status and income may change abruptly due to the economic impact of Covid-19 and limit their ability to afford medication, food, or housing.

Patient challenge	Options for support
Patients with past behavioral health needs may have worsened symptoms due to Covid-19 related stressors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Screen patients for psychosocial needs during check-ins and refer patients to virtual mental health support if necessary. These screenings should include queries about Covid-19 related stressors (such as infected family members, loss of loved ones, and physical distancing), secondary adversities (such as economic stress, job loss, and domestic violence), and behavioral health symptoms • Set up virtual peer support groups for patients with chronic diseases where they can discuss disease management, share stressors, and minimize isolation
Loss of insurance makes medications unaffordable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer patients who have difficulty affording medications to a care navigator or pharmacy benefits manager who can work with them to get necessary supplies at an affordable price
Patients may experience housing instability or struggle to pay their rent, utilities, or mortgage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect patients who experience housing instability with local shelters, community organizations that provide low-income housing options, relief funds that can help them manage their housing and utility costs, and legal support services
Disruption to normal food supply will occur during the Covid-19 outbreak	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you check in with patients, ask if they’ve experienced any disruptions to their normal food supply and, where necessary, refer patients to community food banks. • Connect patients to federal and state benefits such as SNAP enrollment assistance programs and WIC offices • Let patients know if local grocers offer reserved hours or delivery options for patients with health concerns
Patients who are essential workers are at higher risk of exposure but may be unsure what to do if they have Covid-19 symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach out to local essential businesses and share information about remote care options and resources available to their employees • Make sure employees know their legal rights to a safe workplace and how to seek assistance if their work environment violates OSHA/CDC guidelines

Source: Advisory Board interviews and analysis..