

# WELLNESSMONTHLY

Postponing Care Puts Your Health at Risk | October 2020



*“Not only is health a normal condition, but it is our duty not only to attain it but to maintain it.”*

– Joseph Pilates

## Postponing Care Puts Your Health at Risk

**Americans who are postponing preventive checkups, vaccinations and needed care to reduce their COVID-19 exposure risk are increasing their risk of developing conditions that could become serious health problems later on.**

In some cases, this may involve failure to detect “silent” diseases such as hypertension, osteoporosis,

pre-diabetes, certain types of cancer and glaucoma, which can cause blindness. Aches and pains that can become chronic, painful musculoskeletal disorders, gradual hearing loss, gum disease and depression are also examples conditions on the watch list.

### Delayed Care Indicators

Several studies show there were substantial declines in health care utilization in March and April as medical offices limited operations and people generally avoided interactions with the health system. Outpatient care, emergency department visits and elective surgeries were among hard-hit areas.

The Sept. 11, 2020, [Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report](#) cites data showing that by June 30, 2020, an estimated 41 percent of U.S. adults had already delayed or avoided medical care. Avoidance of urgent or emergency care was most prevalent among unpaid caregivers, people with underlying medical conditions, black and Hispanic adults, young adults and people with disabilities.

In a May 2020 [Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking Poll](#), nearly half of 1,189 nationally representative U.S. adult respondents reported they or someone in their household had delayed care due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 68 percent of those who delayed care said they expected to obtain it within the next three months; others planned to wait longer or not seek care.
- 11 percent of respondents said their own or their household member’s condition had gotten worse after postponing or skipping care.
- 39 percent said worry or stress related to the pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health; 12 percent experienced “major” impacts.

Meanwhile, the Health Care Cost Institute analyzed a sample of health claims clearinghouse records from 18 states containing 184 million claims from 30 million patients in 2019 and 94 million claims from 20 million patients for the first six months of 2020. (Refer to the [Impact of COVID-19 on the Use of Preventive Health Care](#), Sept. 9, 2020.) Institute researchers found the pandemic is having a “significant dampening effect.” For example:

- Mammograms and Pap smears to detect cancer in women decreased by nearly 80 percent in April 2020 compared to 2019, and by June were still down by nearly 25 percent.
- Colonoscopies to evaluate bowel health declined by almost 90 percent in mid-April and 30 percent by June compared to 2019.
- PSA test rates for prostate cancer fell 22 percent but now appear to be rebounding.
- Childhood immunizations were, on aggregate, down about 60 percent in mid-April 2020 compared to 2019.

In another disturbing trend, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported declines in the number of people with heart attack symptoms who waited until they felt worse before going to the hospital. This contradicts recommendations to seek immediate emergency care to improve health outcomes.

It's also important to note that Americans who need care but put it off for financial or access reasons affect utilization rates. People who are unemployed, uninsured or underinsured may have to choose between daily living essentials or obtaining medical treatment. In addition, some Americans live in under-served regions of the country with limited access to providers.

When preventive care is delayed it becomes more costly to intervene later as acute conditions do not fully resolve and chronic diseases become more complex, difficult to treat and potentially life-threatening.

## What Can You Do?

It's wise to be concerned about your COVID-19 exposure risk and consistently follow recommendations to protect yourself and others. However, that doesn't mean you should indefinitely defer a wellness check, cancer screening, mental health assessment, or a visit with your dentist or eye doctor.

All decisions about your care should be made in collaboration with your provider. A first step in deciding what's best for you is to call your provider's office to ask about safety precautions that are in place and your encounter options.

“If you aren't comfortable going to the office, ask if there are telemedicine options to talk to someone online, by phone or through email, or whether rescheduling important screening tests is the best choice for you now,” said Lisa C. Richardson, M.D., M.P.H., director, CDC Division of Cancer Prevention and Control.

If you choose to visit your provider in person:

- Follow all contagious disease prevention protocols
- Cover your mouth and nose with a mask
- Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth
- Practice social distancing – at least 6 feet
- Use hand sanitizer or wash your hands with soap and water
- Reschedule routine checkups if you feel ill
- Get vaccinated to reduce your chance of getting seasonal influenza

“Preventive care remains important. Now is the time to get back to basics – taking care of your health, however that may look for you,” Dr. Richardson said.