

BACK TO THE DOCTOR



Dr. Dionna Lomax

Delaying doctor's visit due to COVID can lead to health issues

BY CARRIE STEINWEG
csteinweg@hfchronicle.com

We've probably all heard the old adage: "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." But, even if you ate a whole tree of the fruit, it shouldn't keep you away from annual wellness checks.

Early in the pandemic, access to regular doctor appointments was limited as non-emergency care took a back seat to COVID. But even as doctor offices reopened for routine care, a lot of patients were leery of public places, especially ones where they may encounter sick people. It resulted in a lot of check-ups and routine tests being delayed, dismissed or forgotten.

Now over two years since "coronavirus" and "COVID" became a regular part of our vocabulary, doctors say its time to get back in to see your primary care physician for an in-person physical. Dr. Dionna Lomax, who specializes in Family Medicine at Specialty Physicians of Illinois, LLC in Homewood as part of Franciscan Health, said that the lag in people seeking medical care has resulted in undiagnosed health issues or worsening of some conditions.

"I think the biggest negative effect of patients putting off care is that we're missing chronic conditions or some are worsening, like diabetes, high blood pressure and asthma," she said. She's seeing patients coming back to see her one-and-half to two years later with worsening symptoms or with new problems that are not COVID-related.

Why Annual Wellness Checks are So Important

A once-a-year-physical, also known as a wellness check-up, is essential to keeping yourself healthy. Even if there doesn't seem to be any medical issue requiring a doctor's attention, it's in such visits that doctors are able to recognize signs of health issues and do screenings that would indicate that further testing may be needed.

"The first thing you should do is look around and find a primary care physician for a wellness visit. In that visit, we will do vitals, take a temperature, check pulse



and blood pressure and talk about your health history and family history and ways to reduce risk of diabetes and high blood pressure," she said.

"When we start from there, we can go through different ways to improve your health. And it doesn't have to be medication. Dietary changes and lifestyle changes will also be discussed at your wellness visit."

At an annual wellness check, Lomax said a doctor will also do a mental health screening. "A lot of people's mental health has been affected," she said. At a well visit a doctor can gauge whether therapy or medication would be beneficial.

Most insurance policies will cover an annual wellness visit, she noted.

Role of Telehealth

Telehealth has been a good way for patients to keep in touch with their doctors at times when they may not have felt safe being away from home when the risk of COVID was at its highest. Lomax said it's been useful for acute care, as well. And it's something she continues to use regularly in her practice.

For someone who has been diagnosed with high blood pressure, for example, the patient can then monitor their blood pressure at home and follow-up virtually regarding medications and management. But the key is getting that diagnosis when the patient comes into the office.

"I have a patient who is over 100 and

so when she can't come in, her family sets up a virtual visit and it's worked out very nicely," she said.

But, telehealth isn't meant to completely replace face-to-face visits. Visiting your doctor in person gives them a chance to get to know you a little better.

"It's about having a conversation and your doctor getting to know you and you being comfortable," she said. "I think in-person visits are very important for that and should be done once a year for those who are healthy."

What You Shouldn't Miss

Beyond those regular annual check-ups there are screenings that are generally done when hitting certain age markers that shouldn't be overlooked. When women hit the age of 40, it is generally when a first mammogram is recommended. That timeframe could change depending on family history - and again, discussing that family history is an important part of annual wellness checks. Women in their 20s and 30s should also be seen for regular pap smears to screen for cervical cancer.

"Women of that age are usually seeing a gynecologist who might act as primary care when you're having babies," said Lomax.

For men, a screening for prostate cancer is generally recommended at age 40 - or earlier if warranted by other factors. Colonoscopies are recommended now at age 45 for both women and men.

"There are some gray areas with screenings depending on risk factors, ethnicity, family history or symptoms that come up in an annual visit to indicate that it may need to be done sooner," said Lomax.

What Else Can You Do?

If you haven't been to the doctor since before March 2020, take time to make that appointment and write it in ink on your calendar. If you're seeing a new doctor, it might be a good time to make notes of your health history and family history. And if you're not all that sure about your family health history, it may be time to do some digging. Question family members about diseases or disorders that are common in your family and note causes of death of grandparents, parents and their siblings, especially if they died at an early age.

Knowing what your high risks can help you recognize signs if something seems off. Lomax noted that women who had gestational diabetes during pregnancy are at higher risk for developing diabetes later on.

"We have ways of checking if you're pre-diabetic and can give you treatment plans for lifestyle changes," she said.

A blood pressure monitor is something that Lomax said is good to have at home. They can be purchased inexpensively online or at pharmacies. They are easy to use and can indicate if intervention is needed.

But getting in for a wellness visit is your first step.

"I think we are at a point where offices are very safe," she said. "It's a very good time to come in person and see a doctor for a physical."

Lomax also noted that one big thing you can do toward good overall health is to get vaccinated for COVID.

"I encourage vaccination for COVID-19. Even though the numbers are low, the risk is still very real for (those with) serious issues and I'm still encouraging patients to get vaccinated. If you have received the initial vaccination dose, but haven't yet gotten a booster, a third shot is recommended six months after the second dose for the general public - and for those who are severely immunocompromised, a fourth dose is recommended, said Lomax.