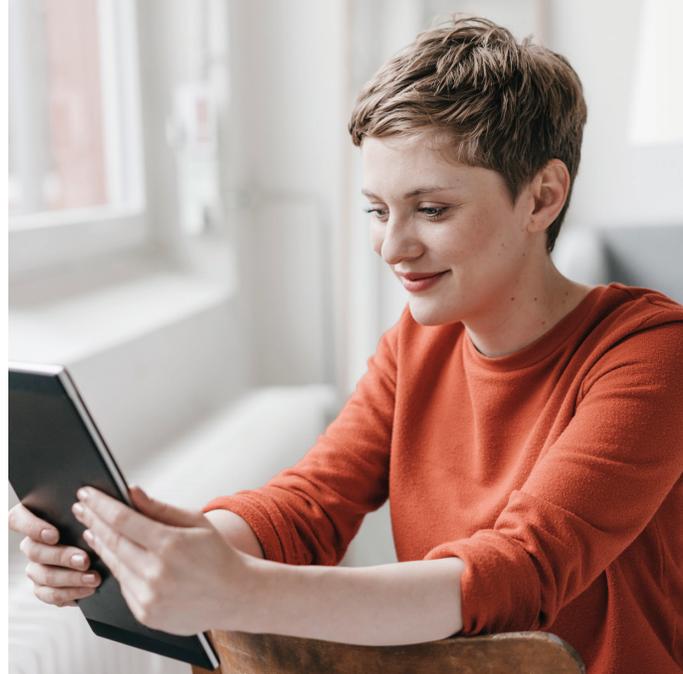




## Helping employees get guidance and support to resume care deferred by COVID-19

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As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of your employees were forced to delay any treatments for non-emergency medical conditions. This includes elective surgeries. In addition, chronic conditions may have become uncontrolled without access to office appointments. One way to support your employees is

to encourage them to be proactive in their health. As providers begin to reschedule elective procedures, now is the time to engage with employees so they can navigate elective options and treatment plans using the power of virtual care services.

By mid-March it was clear: Hospitals across the United States had to alter how they handled elective surgeries and treatments in order to prepare for patients diagnosed with coronavirus. Surgeries for joint replacements, early-stage cancer, cataracts, and kidney stones were paused so personal protective equipment could be rationed and hospital beds would remain open. But for most people, elective surgery isn't "optional." While these procedures have been delayed, people continue to struggle with their health issues and may require support to address their care needs in the right way at the right time.

Postponing elective surgeries has the potential to result in a variety of negative setbacks for employees. But alternatives exist for other procedures. For example, if an employee's hip or knee replacement was canceled in March, he or she likely continued to suffer from mobility and pain issues at home as they wait for assistance. In addition to requiring more prescription drugs to alleviate pain, playing this waiting game also stresses individuals both physically and mentally and can even result in depression. Without access to support and expert care advice, employee productivity slides and their ability to enjoy a healthy, productive life declines as well.

Many employees who cope with one or more chronic conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes may have chosen to avoid in-person appointments with care providers during the stay-at-home period. But if left unattended, inappropriately controlled complications can be dire. The Centers for Disease Control reports that 90% of the nation's \$3.5 trillion in annual healthcare expenses are spent on people with chronic or mental health care conditions.

If employees were forced to defer elective surgeries or significant non-surgical treatments, then giving them tools to help them understand what alternatives may exist will improve their health. Even as states begin to allow hospitals to reschedule elective surgeries, the backlog and waiting period will likely be months. According to a study conducted by the CovidSurg Collaborative, 72.3% of elective surgeries (up to 28 million worldwide) were canceled due to the pandemic, and it will take hospitals months to catch up on this backlog.<sup>1</sup>

Another common issue created by the past several months of working from home is new aches and pains caused by home office environments that are not ergonomically friendly. The ability to use virtual care services to connect with experts to learn how to ease musculoskeletal issues can be life-changing. Employees can ask questions and get consultative advice on whether they need to pursue scheduling an in-person appointment with a specialist for care. In addition to available coaching tools for back and neck issues, employees can also use virtual care to find a high-quality provider. Or they can work with a virtual care expert to learn how to improve or eliminate the issue.

Clearly, employee health issues that existed before COVID-19 continue to exist today, and new health concerns may exist for some employees. Now is the time to consider employee benefits offerings and help employees understand that they can re-examine their healthcare options, get second opinions, and continue to get the care they need. So what can employers do?

**1.** Ensure employees are aware of eligibility and understand their virtual care options.

Easy-to-use virtual care services are just a click or phone call away for employees with this benefit. As scheduling for elective surgeries is delayed, now is the ideal time for employees to become better educated about their options, including the use of a virtual care expert to get a second opinion about an elective surgery or therapy. In addition, they can work with an expert physician to create an at-home treatment plan designed to help them minimize issues while waiting for surgery.

**2.** Make sure employees get the help they need in their moment of need. If an employee was recently diagnosed with a significant condition just prior to or during the pandemic, access to virtual care means answers to important questions are readily available. Individuals who find themselves coping with a new health condition are eager to consult with a knowledgeable physician to understand exactly what they're up against. What issues can wait? What needs to happen ASAP? When can a treatment plan begin?

Virtual care services that offer access to physician experts are a perfect starting point to help employees understand the many options that are available to them—and start down a path of treatment.

**3.** Create confidence in the virtual care services available to employees. Through your ongoing communication efforts, remind employees that the virtual care benefits available to them feature access to expert physicians across a variety of medical subspecialties. When employees understand that virtual care adheres to clinical practice guidelines, they'll become more confident in accessing the benefit when they need it.

Just because employees may be isolating at home during this pandemic doesn't mean they can't access the guidance and support they need from healthcare experts.

Throughout this global pandemic, virtual care services can deliver a convenient access point for employees and help them connect with expert medical specialists when they need assistance. The service also helps rebuild the confidence that may have been compromised in recent months, and empower employees to get the care they need without unnecessary lapses in visits with their provider.

<sup>1</sup>University of Birmingham, Birmingham, U.K. "COVID-19 disruption will lead to 28 million surgeries cancelled worldwide." May 15, 2020. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/university/colleges/mds/news/2020/05/covid-global-surgery.aspx>."

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