

## Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Other Healthcare Crisis

COVID-19 has dominated the headlines since being officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020. Terms like social distancing, superspreader, and personal protective equipment have entered our daily lexicon. The pandemic has changed the entire healthcare landscape for practitioners, administrators, and patients alike. While much has been discussed about the effects of the virus on our lives, health, and economy, there's another healthcare crisis sweeping that country that has gone largely unnoticed.



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Patients everywhere are avoiding doctor's offices, clinics, and hospitals — to an alarming degree. Even patients with the most delicate, chronic healthcare conditions are foregoing routine and emergency care in great numbers.

The little-discussed crisis has short- and long-term implications for patient health and the future of healthcare. To successfully re-engage patients, providers must focus on targeted communication, safety initiatives, data, and education.

## The Current State of Private Practices and Clinics

Private practices have seen a significant decrease in visits and revenue across the country. Even as some areas have eased restrictions, patients remain hesitant to visit healthcare providers. Of the **2,750** primary care physicians surveyed by the Primary Care Collaborative, 79% reported seeing fewer patients in-person, but doing more outreach via video and phone. However, this shift does not necessarily translate to reduced overhead costs, which might make up for decreased revenues. Thirty-nine percent of the physicians reported overhead costs to be about the same as pre-pandemic, while **31%** indicated they had increased.

The greatest obstacles to receiving care may be affordability. Unemployment peaked at **14.7%** in April, 2020. This increase in job loss has left approximately **7.7 million** Americans without employer-sponsored healthcare plans, and others have maxed out their health savings accounts. Including the impact to dependents, the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) estimated that nearly 27 million Americans are without basic healthcare coverage. Even before the pandemic, the percentage of uninsured Americans rose by **9.2%**. Thus budgets have grown tighter for many Americans, and patients struggle to afford copays and/or manage high-deductible plans as they face choices to pay for food and housing versus healthcare.



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# 14.7%

Unemployed Americans  
in April 2020

# 7.7 million

Americans without  
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healthcare plans

# 27 million

Americans without basic  
healthcare coverage



# 65%

Increase in telehealth demand in 2020

# 200 million

Telehealth visits by year end

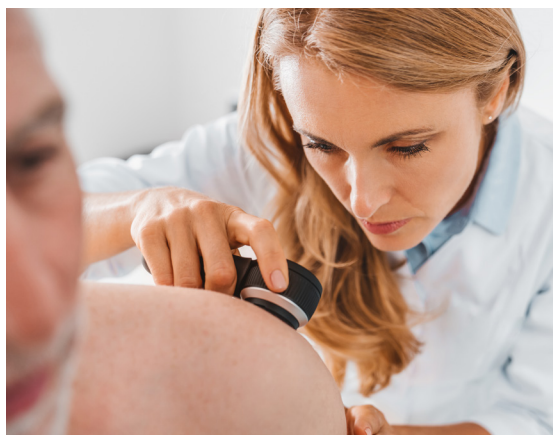
Providers are turning to telehealthcare to ensure patients receive necessary care. A recent Frost and Sullivan report estimates that [telehealth demand will increase by nearly 65%](#) in 2020 and will top [200 million visits by year end](#). Practitioners have worked quickly to implement the technology needed for telehealth and provide training for both healthcare providers and patients.

**More than a third of adults over age 65 face potential difficulties seeing their doctor via telemedicine**

While the response to telehealth has certainly been favorable, obstacles still remain. According to [researchers at the University of California, San Francisco](#), “more than a third of adults over age 65 face potential difficulties seeing their doctor via telemedicine.” Absent internet access, technology tools such as PCs, tablets, or Smartphones, or technology know how, the hurdles can be significant, “with the greatest challenges experienced by older, low-income men in remote or rural areas, especially those with disabilities or poor health.” Given that these populations often have chronic health conditions, complex care needs, and multiple morbidities, healthcare providers must take steps to assure patients, provide digital accommodations, and offer in-person appointments when appropriate.

## Which Specialists Are Seeing the Greatest Drop in Utilization?

Primary care physicians aren't the only ones reporting a decline in patient visits. In the first months of the pandemic, [healthcare revenue decreased by nearly 50%](#) in the areas of primary care, oral surgery, dermatology, gastroenterology, and cardiology. The cancellation of elective procedures was a significant reason for this drop. Despite the "term" elective, many of these procedures are time-sensitive and life-improving, if not life-saving. Healthcare providers worry that patients who cancel these procedures and fail to reschedule them will suffer consequences on their health and quality of life.



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While the drop in utilization for pediatric primary care has not been as sharp as other specialties, pediatricians have voiced concern that children may be missing important immunizations and wellness checks. The KFF reported the following in their recent [Children's Health and Well Being During the Coronavirus issue](#): "Parents may be delaying preventative and ongoing care for their children due to social distancing policies as well as concerns about exposure. Reports based on health care claims show declines in rates of vaccinations, child screenings, dental services, and outpatient mental health services among Medicaid/CHIP child beneficiaries." Lack of immunizations may make children vulnerable to preventable diseases.

The issue notes that delays in care are especially concerning for the **13 million** children with special healthcare needs in the United States. Loss of parent or guardian employment may also result in a disruption in children's healthcare coverage. The KFF issue also highlights the impact of this loss of income on fulfilling basic household needs for children.



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that [six in 10 adults](#) in the United States have a chronic disease; four in every 10 have two or more chronic diseases. These diseases, including diabetes, cancer, and heart disease, are the leading causes of death and disability. They also present an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

Public health measures encourage this population to be especially mindful of hygiene, social distancing, and taking care of their health. Yet, recent research reveals that patients with chronic care are avoiding routine and urgent care. The Primary Care Collective surveyed 750 clinicians in May across the nation to better understand [the impact of delayed care](#) due to COVID-19.

**Their findings indicate that delayed care will result in serious and even fatal repercussions:**

**38%** of clinicians believe that diverted or avoided care will result in non-Covid-19-related deaths among their patients

**60%** of clinicians believe patients that diverted or avoided care will result in avoidable illnesses

**74%** of clinicians expect to see an increase in patients with mental health needs

A drop in routine and urgent visits for patients with chronic diseases can be life-threatening. Many of these patients have foregone regular check-ups due to understandable fears of contracting COVID-19. The American Medical Association refers to this trend as [“pandemic fear”](#) and urges providers to engage with patients who have delayed care. Methods to re-engage these patients include video visits, communicating with family members (especially about how to use [telehealth tools](#)), and explaining safety measures.



## Pandemic Accelerating the Decentralization of Healthcare

The pandemic places even greater pressures on emergency and intensive care units, which were already under strain before COVID-19. Providers are beginning to see the effects of delayed care with late presentations of conditions and diseases. As private practices close across the country, these units are forced to play the roles of both primary care and emergency physicians.

Rural hospitals, in particular, are struggling to remain open due to severe financial strains. Data from the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research reveals that over 30 states have experienced at least one [rural hospital cessation](#) since 2010. Eighteen rural hospitals closed in 2019. As of August 2020, [14 more rural hospitals](#) have closed in the United States.

In the future, these rural hospitals may rely more on non-physician medical providers (such as physician assistants, nurse practitioners, and nurses) to provide care to patients. This process would allow patients to receive necessary care while lightening financial load. However, much remains to be seen regarding the coordination of medical boards, legislatures, and Congress necessary to make the practice a reality. Regardless, current trends indicate a push toward the decentralization of healthcare.

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# 30+

States have experienced at least one rural hospital cessation since 2010

# 32

Rural hospitals have closed in the US since 2019



## Strategies for Engaging Patients

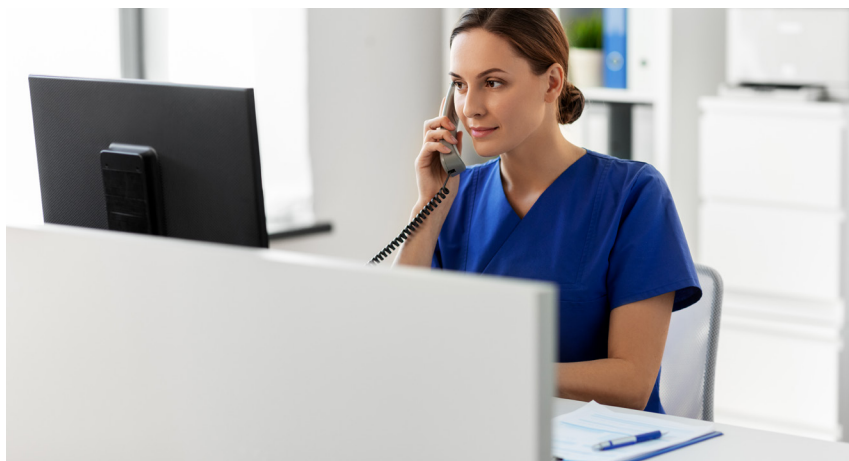
To re-engage patients who have avoided or diverted care, take a multifaceted approach. Now more than ever, patients want to hear directly from their providers. They want to understand the screening and safety measures you've put in place, as well as how to best care for themselves and their loved ones. By opening the doors to communication, you can connect with patients and address fears about receiving the care they need.



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## Lead with Empathy

Personal outreach can make all the difference when re-engaging with stressed and worried patients. As you craft your messaging, lead with empathy to build [stronger patient-provider relationships](#). Take time to imagine what your patients are feeling and the questions they likely have. Think back to recent conversations with patients. If possible, have providers send direct messages to patients through a secure, compliant platform. Given the number of communications we receive every day, a personalized message is sure to stand out.



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## Explain How You are Protecting Patients and Staff

Merely sending an email that your practice is open isn't enough to re-connect with patients. Patients want details about how you're cleaning surfaces, how often you're cleaning, and the protocols you're following. **They also want to know how to prepare for their visit; for example:**

- How to schedule or reschedule an appointment?
- Will PPE be required or provided?
- How to enter and exit the building safely?
- What steps you're taking to prevent exposure to COVID-positive patients?
- What to expect for screening; temperature readings, assessments, and any additional paperwork or steps?
- Can a caregiver, spouse or partner, or family member be brought along?

Be sure to inform patients of any changes to your waiting room, like requirements to wait outside or in their vehicle. In these times of great stress, giving patients time to prepare will help to reduce anxiety. Overall, your messaging surrounding safety protocols should be clear and consistent. You can even make videos and share photographs for a better demonstration of your practice's current setup.

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## Details Instructions and Encouragement for Using Telehealth Services

To encourage more patients to book telehealth services, make sure patients understand how you'll connect with them. In your communications, outline options for telehealth tools and provide a quick how-to guide for using them.

Patients are growing more accepting of telehealth features across all demographics. You may need to engage a caregiver or loved one to help the patient use the telehealth device in some instances. This [Telehealth Implementation Playbook](#) from the American Medical Association provides resources for practices beginning or enhancing their telehealth services.



## Empower Patients to Take Charge

So many factors are out of our control during the pandemic. You can encourage patients to take charge of their healthcare even during times of uncertainty with the right content. Take note of preferred patient communication methods and topics through a survey. **Forty-five percent** of patients express a desire for providers to discuss lifestyle and wellness; include topics around emerging health developments and tips to stay healthy at home in your content. Integrate these resources into your patient portal for a comprehensive approach.



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## Layer Your Communication Channels

Multi-channel communications can help you engage with more patients and reiterate important information. Common channels include text messages, emails, direct mail, communication portals, and social media. General information can be communicated through email, text, and social media to educate large populations.

This is the ideal time to highlight providers and staff at your practice. Give employees the spotlight and share how they're working to fight COVID-19. These profiles can be shared directly to social media pages and stories. You can even bring a little levity to your content by sharing fun facts, pets, trivia, etc.

Personalized and confidential information should be reserved for HIPAA-compliant platforms. [Patient engagement platforms](#) allow you to send messages in real-time, provide education resources, and offer online scheduling and billing tools.

## Predict Care Needs

It's important to identify patients who have delayed preventive and routine care, and send them targeted engagement. To do so, analyze patient records, canceled appointments, and claims records. You can take a triage approach and first engage with patients who have chronic or serious conditions. Send direct messages to these patients, reminding them of necessary appointments and encouraging them to book an appointment (virtual or in-person). In some cases, a phone call reminder may be the most effective way to connect with particularly disengaged patients. Take the time to share information about your safety measures and new protocols.

In the midst of this year's great challenges, providers and patients have shown their willingness to adapt and persevere. The healthcare landscape is changing rapidly with new methods of treatment, standards of care, and patient expectations to manage. As we work to overcome COVID-19, it is critical to create a strategy for patient re-engagement. The approach will be dependent on your patients and specialty. However, every patient re-engagement strategy must include empathy, multi-communication channels, and personalization to be successful.



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As you build your strategic approach, lean into tools that will help you bring it to life. At RXNT, we're constantly enhancing our solutions to meet the real-time needs of providers. Our goal is to strengthen patient-provider relationships through solutions that foster communication, engagement, and efficiency. For a closer look at how our software can benefit your practice, [get a virtual, no-obligation demonstration.](#)