



What happens to vision care during a health crisis?

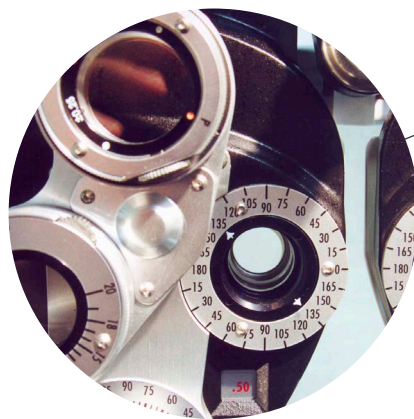
Examining the impact of the
COVID-19 pandemic on eye care
and the value of vision health

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**VERSANT HEALTH'S SECOND ANNUAL VISION WELLNESS STUDY
FEBRUARY 2021**

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Where does vision care fit into a health crisis?

In a year dominated by a health pandemic, during which activities were divided into essential and nonessential services, what happened to eye care services? The answer is: They endured.

And for good reason! Physicians have cautioned their patients against delaying care during the pandemic, noting that minor health issues could become more serious if not properly evaluated and treated. Eye care is no exception.

The second annual Vision Wellness Study looks at people's perceptions of eye care during a landmark year for the healthcare industry, including the value of eye care services, interest in telemedicine, and concerns about eye care costs.

The study found more respondents reporting that they have received an eye exam in the past two years compared to the inaugural study released in 2020. To add, a majority are confident in eye care professionals' ability to identify chronic health conditions during routine eye exams, pointing to the important role that vision care plays in overall health. Many respondents report a new interest in telemedicine, i.e., virtual eye care visits. Some, particularly young respondents, say that telemedicine would make them more likely to make an appointment with an eye care professional, highlighting a desire for easier access eye on their own terms. Telemedicine could also solve for a barrier to eye care access that was cited more often by health plan executives — the lack of or cost of transportation.

Read on to explore more study findings.



Access to eye care

Many respondents saw value in accessing eye care in 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, signifying the essential nature of clear and healthy vision in our everyday lives, particularly during a time when safe, independent living has become an important part of wellbeing.

Because of the pandemic, interest in ocular telemedicine (i.e., virtual eye care) is predicted to positively impact the future of care access.

Still, respondents—particularly those living in lower income households—report barriers to eye care access beyond the availability of ocular telemedicine, including the perceived affordability of care and a lack of transportation for in-person care.



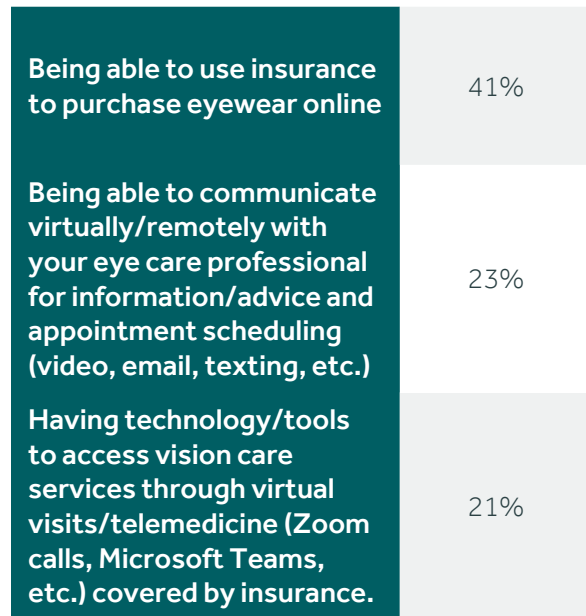
The COVID-19 pandemic and ocular telemedicine

In response to the pandemic environment, this year's Vision Wellness Study added questions on telemedicine, finding significant new interest in technology that makes virtual eye care visits a reality.

Two thirds (66%) of respondents say having access to telemedicine so they can consult with doctors virtually is a very or somewhat important healthcare topic.

Services that would have a high impact on the likelihood of purchasing vision insurance

Respondents whose household members do not currently have or are unsure whether they have vision insurance



15%

More than 1 in 10 respondents who have seen an eye doctor in the past two years say their household members might not visit an eye doctor as often as they would like because they don't yet offer technology for virtual visits or ocular telemedicine.

While interest in telemedicine for eye care has accelerated among all demographics, young people show the most receptivity. Health plan executives believe that telemedicine advancements are leading the way in positive impact on care access.

Services with a high or moderate impact on household members seeing an eye doctor more often

Respondents who have had an eye exam in the past two years

Having technology to access vision care services through telemedicine (Zoom calls, Microsoft Teams, etc.)	69%
Being able to communicate virtually with your eye doctor for information, advice and appointments (video, email, texting, etc.)	66%
Being able to buy eyewear online	64%

67%

of respondents say having access to technology for virtual visits would make them more likely to make an eye doctor appointment.

Services that have a high impact on household members' likelihood to see an eye doctor more often

Respondents who have had an eye exam in the past two years

	Under age 40	Ages 40–59	Ages 60+
Having technology to access vision care services through telemedicine (Zoom calls, Microsoft Teams, etc.)	34%	34%	21%
Being able to communicate virtually with one's eye doctor for information, advice and appointments (video, email, texting, etc.)	38%	34%	15%
Being able to buy eyewear online	32%	30%	16%

The COVID-19 pandemic sped up the implementation of telemedicine for eye care, as noted in *Ocular Telemedicine as an Enhancement for In-Person Eye Care*. According to CEO Kirk Rothrock, "Telemedicine is playing a larger role in care delivery, and there's certainly a place for it in increasing access to eye care and strengthening the relationships between patients and providers."

The social determinants of eye health

Health plan executives more often report seeing transportation—or the lack thereof—as a key obstacle for members' getting access to eye care services.

Which obstacles have a significant impact on your members' ability to access eye care services?

A total of 17 health plan executives were surveyed each year

	2020 report	2019 report
Cost of, or lack of, transportation to eye care professionals	88%	63%
Cost or affordability of eye care services	59%	75%
Limited or no coverage for eye care services	53%	75%
Lack of awareness of ocular telemedicine options	53%	Response option not included in the previous survey

Care costs, affordability and lack of insurance remain the top barriers to accessing eye care reported by respondents—and even more so for people in lower income households, who more frequently report facing these hurdles.

Reasons household members do not visit an eye care professional as often as they would like

Respondents who have had an eye exam in the past two years

	Under \$35K	\$35K–\$74,000	\$75K+
Cost or affordability	43%	36%	26%
No vision insurance to cover eye care costs	24%	20%	17%
Eye care professional(s) we use do not offer technology for virtual visits/telemedicine (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.)	9%	14%	19%
Cost of, or lack of, transportation to eye care professionals	16%	10%	17%

81% of respondents say they received an eye exam in the past two years...

68% ...but only 68% of people in households with incomes under \$35K say the same.

Evaluating the value of eye health

Costs remain the top healthcare concern for Americans year over year, which may come as little surprise after a tough economic year. Respondents report using a combination of preventative care—including seeing their eye doctor—and healthy habits they can perform at home to control their overall care costs.

Regardless of care costs, more respondents report having received an eye exam within the past two years. To add, respondents continue to say that identifying eye diseases and other types of chronic conditions are the most valuable services provided by eye care professionals—even more so by those who say they specifically use eye care to save money on their overall care.

Health plan executives agree with Americans regarding both the importance of cost management and the value of eye exams, predicting that vision care will be even more important after the pandemic.



The high value and cost management of eye care

The most important healthcare topic to respondents is identifying ways to decrease overall healthcare costs for their families, and at-home health goals have become more important to doing so in the stay-at-home environment. Still, there is an opportunity for more people to see the connection between regular eye exams and managing household care costs.

Top three healthcare topics deemed “very important”

All respondents



How do household members reduce healthcare costs?

All respondents

	2020 report	2019 report
Regularly see a primary care physician	52%	58%
Health goals (e.g., exercising)	46%	50%
Regularly see a dentist	44%	54%
Regularly see an eye care professional	40%	51%
At-home remedies	29%	30%

Respondents continue to report eye care professionals' ability to identify both eye diseases and other chronic conditions as the highest value services offered, and those who use eye care to save money on their overall care rank those services as high-value more often.

Services offered by eye care professionals that are rated as high-value

Respondents who have had an eye exam in the past two years

	All respondents	Respondents who use eye care to save money on their overall care
Being able to identify eye diseases or other serious eye problems, even if your vision seems fine	69%	74%
Being able to identify other serious health problems you might have, such as diabetes, early stage hypertension, etc.	59%	66%
Being able to get covered routine eye exams more frequently	54%	60%

Simultaneously, health plan executives continue to see value in routine eye care as it pertains to overall health, but they are seeking more cost management and turning to increased transparency and evidence-based medicine in managed vision care providers to do so.

Members' access to routine eye exams has a high or moderate impact each of the following

A total of 17 health plan executives were surveyed

	2020 report	2019 report
Early detection of other health issues, such as diabetes, early-stage hypertension and heart disease	100%	94%
The reduction of total eye care costs for the health plan	94%	100%
The reduction of out-of-pocket expenses among members for eye care services	94%	94%
The enhancement of member satisfaction with their total health	88%	100%

Services that will have a somewhat or very favorable impact on better managing healthcare, including costs, in 2020 and beyond

A total of 17 health plan executives were surveyed each year

	2020 report	2019 report
Transparency in healthcare costs	94%	81%
Consumerism in healthcare	88%	86%
Value-based and shared-risk payer-provider arrangements	82%	94%
New, nontraditional or technology-based entrants into the healthcare system that enable remote care	82%	87%



Health plan executives see evidence-based medicine as one of the most valuable services that vision insurers can offer when it comes to being more proactive about reducing overall healthcare costs; it was cited by 53% of health plan executive respondents.

How does evidence-based medicine control costs? It helps ensure that the care provided is as appropriate and proven as possible, reducing the chances that greater care is needed in the future. This saves money not only for health plans but also for their members, many of whom are taking on more and more of the cost of care.

The significance of eye care across generations

Eye health and healthy vision play a critical role in seniors' lifestyles and the management of their overall health, even during a pandemic.

Services that would make respondents make an eye care professional appointment more often, by age

Respondents who have had an eye exam in the past two years

	Under age 40	Ages 40–59	Ages 60+
Being able to identify eye diseases	83%	90%	93%
Being able to identify other chronic conditions	78%	86%	81%

People with children in their households are more likely to say their family members get eye exams often, highlighting the role that childhood vision health plays in spurring full family eye health.

Frequency of eye exams for household members

Respondents who have had an eye exam in the past two years

	Respondents with children in household	Respondents without children in household
About once every six months	30%	15%
About once per year	50%	56%
About once every two years	16%	19%
About once every three to five years	2%	6%

Eye health is critical to whole body health

In fact, eye exams are one of the lowest-cost and least-invasive methods of gauging overall health, with the ability to help diagnose more than 30 chronic health conditions, including diabetes, hypertension, Graves' disease and more.

The good news is that the Vision Wellness Study has found that more Americans report getting eye exams every one to two years, as recommended by the American Optometric Association.ⁱⁱⁱ

After an unparalleled year for health in 2020, the value of eye care as an inexpensive vehicle for not only healthy vision but also early disease detection and intervention is likely to grow. With more options for ocular telemedicine becoming a reality, the future of access to eye care is promising.

Methodology

The Vision Wellness Study by Versant Health conducted online surveys with 525 consumers over the age of 18, as well as 17 health plan executives between October 30 and November 17, 2020. They were asked their opinions of routine eye care, access to eye exams, care costs and other topics related to managed vision care.

About Versant Health

Versant Health, a wholly-owned subsidiary of MetLife, is one of the nation's leading managed vision care companies, serving more than 35 million members nationwide. Through our Davis Vision plans and Superior Vision plans, we help members enjoy the wonders of sight through healthy eyes and vision. Providing vision and eye health solutions that range from routine vision benefits to medical management, Versant Health has a unique visibility and scale across the total eye health value chain. As a result, members enjoy a seamless experience with access to one of the broadest provider networks in the industry and an exclusive frame collection. Commercial groups, individuals, third parties, and health plans that serve government-sponsored programs such as Medicaid and Medicare are among our valued customers.

To learn more about Versant Health visit [versanthealth.com](https://www.versanthealth.com).

Resources

- i Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Delay or Avoidance of Medical Care Because of COVID-19-Related Concerns — United States, June 2020
- ii Primary Care Collaborative, Primary Care & Covid-19: Week 22 Survey. <https://www.pcpcc.org/2020/11/14/primary-care-covid-19-week-22-survey>
- iii American Optometric Association, Comprehensive eye exams. <https://www.aoa.org/healthy-eyes/caring-for-your-eyes/eye-exams?sso=y>



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