

Telemedicine, COVID-19 Masks, and Elbow Bumps

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the way doctors practice medicine and care for patients. To practice social distancing and reduce the risk of patient and staff exposure in a crowded doctor's office, many physicians are moving to telemedicine video conferencing with their patients. This allows patients to safely stay in touch with their doctors, report on their health issues, and review their medications. For patients who are committed to self-managing their health, they can report on their weight, blood pressure, heart rate, blood glucose levels, and even steps counted and heart rhythms recorded on their mobile health apps. For elderly patients who have difficulty arranging transportation and getting to their doctor's office, telemedicine is an excellent way to keep in contact with their physician on a virtual basis. Ideally, this allows patients to confer with their doctors and prevent the need for an emergency room visit or an admission to the hospital.

BY DR. TIM SANBORN

A recent case in point was an 89-year-old patient of mine with chronic lung disease, hypertension and atrial fibrillation. With technical assistance from her adult son on his mobile phone, she was able to report her latest blood pressure and heart rate measurements. As a cardiologist, I always like to ask a patient how they are doing in terms of their exercise and walking. When I asked this question, this spunky, 4'11" Italian woman quickly grabbed her son's cell phone out of his hand and responded, "Here doctor, look at me," and proudly displayed on live video how she could walk from her living room to her kitchen. I smiled at her as she held the cell phone in one hand and maneuvered her portable oxygen tank with the other. Despite these limitations, she was able to negotiate around her large living-room couch and her long, family-style dining table. By the time she arrived in her kitchen, she was describing with pride the Italian lamb ragu pasta and arugula salad she was preparing for her husband, son and daughter-in-law. In the background, I saw her well-organized copper pots and pans hanging above her well-worn, wooden-block kitchen island. This telemedicine visit not only helped to adjust her medications to control her heart rate and blood pressure when she walked, it also gave me more appreciation for her joy of cooking and



dinning. In the future, I would remember this as I further developed our doctor-patient relationship. The video image on my office computer of her walking and then describing her cooking was priceless.

It truly warmed my heart for the day.

One of the primary recommendations from the CDC guidelines is the importance of wearing a mask in public. Now, all patients who require a doctor's visit arrive with masks of various fabric and colors. Most of these masks are light green or pink hospital issue. Others are fabricated from bright red or blue colorful bandanas. Many women fashion their masks to show their best-loved birds or bright flowers of roses, daffodils or tulips from their garden.

One school teacher fashioned hers in a thick woven cotton pattern of red, white and blue stars and stripes. This led to our discussion of her passion for marching in the 4th of July parade. We laughed together as she struggled to keep the heavy, bulky fabric in place. Men often come in with masks promoting their favorite sports teams. Practicing in southeastern Wisconsin, I see an equal number of masks supporting the Green Bay Packers and the Chicago Bears. One middle-aged man made his mask using a synthetic fabric depicting a deer in the woods. When I asked him about this forest scene, he quickly began describing his enthusiasm for hunting. "Doc, I really like to go hunting. Walking in the Wisconsin Northwoods helps me stay fit. Isn't that what you've always been telling me to do?"

Rather than inhibiting dialogue or stifling conversation, I have discovered that these COVID-19 masks can allow patients to reveal more of themselves and what they enjoy doing. When I first see these creative masks, I like to ask about them. They serve to create new avenues for discussion and rapport with patients as I listen to their stories.

Because of the COVID-19 health guidelines, patients and I now use the elbow bump instead of a traditional handshake when we first greet each other as I enter the exam room. As our visit concludes, a second elbow bump always generates a smile, which peeks out from under the patient's mask and is accompanied by a slightly muffled chuckle and a sparkle in their eyes.

It is said that listening to a patient's description of their interests and physical touch are important aspects of connecting with patients. Despite living in today's COVID-19 era, it is remarkable how physicians can still have meaningful relationships with patients, even if solely through telemedicine, face masks and elbow bumps. □