

# Engaging Employees In Their Health During Covid-19 And Beyond

Invest in health and wellness services that  
can be delivered virtually and digitally

 By **Andrea Bloom**

The pandemic has dramatically changed employee utilization of healthcare services, where they receive them, and the modality of care. Employers have a key role to play to adjust to the demands of Covid-19 to ensure that the health and well-being of employees and their families continue to be met. New resources and tools, available digitally and virtually, are required to fill the void that Covid-19 has created.

## Reduction in Utilization of Healthcare Services

The pandemic has reduced utilization of healthcare significantly as people are wary of exposing themselves to Covid-19 by going to their doctor or a healthcare facility. Although employers may currently be experiencing lower healthcare costs because of reduced utilization, in the long run, it may cost them more as delaying critical care will only push utilization to the future, when problems become more acute and costly to treat.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that at the end of Q2 2020, 41% of U.S. adults reported that they delayed or avoided healthcare due to Covid.<sup>1</sup> Another study showed that even with exponential growth in telehealth

appointments, primary care doctor visits were still 21% lower in Q2 2020 when compared to the same quarter in 2019 and 2018. Vital health monitoring measurements related to those visits also declined, with blood pressure and cholesterol checks decreasing by 50% and 34%, respectively<sup>2</sup>.

The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) reported<sup>3</sup> in the weeks following the start of the pandemic, that the weekly number of newly diagnosed cancers for 6 cancers combined fell by 46.4% compared to the same time period in 2019. Significant declines were seen in all cancer types – breast, colorectal, lung, pancreatic, gastric, and esophageal.

Extrapolating from those statistics, we can see that there is a healthcare avalanche awaiting us due to so many people delaying care. High blood pressure and high cholesterol are risk factors for heart attack and stroke – and treating an employee for these acute events is far costlier than treating high blood pressure and high cholesterol with diet, exercise, and medication. As people put off critical screenings such as colonoscopies and mammograms, we will see more cancer diagnoses for colon cancer and breast cancer emerge down the road.



A delay in cancer diagnosis will lead to diagnosis at more advanced stages. This leads to poorer clinical outcomes including an increase in mortality rates. These are just a few examples of the many consequences of people delaying care across a wide range of health conditions. And it's not only healthcare costs that are impacted, as many of these people are valued company employees whose health and well-being influence their work productivity and job satisfaction.

### **The Impact of Working From Home**

Since many employees are now working from home, many employers have put vital onsite health and wellness programs on hold. Health fairs, biometric screenings, flu shots, wellness seminars, and even onsite medical care may be relics of the past and not supported in the future. These are the kinds of activities where companies had a captive audience with their employees in communicating the importance of better health and wellness and providing the opportunity to build a “culture of health”. With many employees now working from home, they are no longer exposed to that culture on a daily basis.

Many of these programs that are now on hold are feeders into other vital programs that are part of comprehensive health and wellness benefits. Examples include disease management, smoking cessation, nutrition, health coaching, stress management, physical activity, substance abuse, healthy pregnancy, mental well-being, and more.

### **The Acceleration of Telehealth for Delivering Healthcare Services**

Prior to the pandemic, telehealth represented a relatively small model of healthcare delivery with about 11% of people using it on a regular basis. Now almost 50% use telehealth. And 76% of people surveyed said they were highly likely to use telehealth moving forward – with most people reporting a high satisfaction rate.<sup>4</sup>

There were multiple factors that helped telehealth unfold – both on the supply and demand side. One

significant factor was the expanded coverage of telehealth services by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). Other insurers followed the lead of CMS, which then opened the floodgates to telehealth.

#### **Key changes CMS made include**

- Approving more than 80 new healthcare services that could be conducted through telehealth.
- Lifting restrictions on where people could receive telehealth services so they could now access them from their home.
- Waiving geographic restrictions so that anybody could access telehealth, not just people in rural or underserved geographical areas.
- Changing reimbursement so that telehealth visits would be reimbursed at equivalent rates to in-person visits.
- Employers need to work with their health plans and provider organizations to be aware of the totality of telehealth options for employees. Once these are well understood, employers must focus on building employee awareness around company-sponsored healthcare benefits that include telehealth options.

### **Converting “Brick and Mortar” Health and Wellness Programs to Digital**

With Covid-19, employers had to quickly respond to a large percentage of employees working from home by converting their employee health and wellness programs to a digital format. Going digital provides companies with the opportunity to scale programming with consistency and availability. Prior to going digital, employees at the main office might often receive more robust wellness programming than employees in satellite offices or who work from home. “Live” programs deployed virtually can be made available to the entire workforce and recorded so that employees can participate at a time that's convenient for them.



With spouses and family members of employees now also being able to access programs remotely, a company is now able to extend health and wellness benefits to their total insured population. Physical activity programs have become more popular during Covid-19 as people don't need to suit up in front of their work colleagues and feel intimidated about being watched – they can turn their video off and follow along. The new digital format has many upsides and as people get more used to the technology, they tend to access more programs and feel they are increasing their control over their own health.

As an example, employers could create a virtual health fair and work to gain a high attendance rate by providing an incentive for participation. Think about how many more employees and their family members could visit by keeping the virtual health fair opened for days or weeks, versus what you would be limited to with a live, onsite format. Imagine developing interactive booths that create awareness about the range of health and wellness programs available to employees. Companies can get creative

and send wellness gift packages to the homes of employees and their families in advance of the health fair. These packages could include healthy recipes, exercise bands, water bottles, sets of company masks, healthy snacks, and wellness activities that family members can do together. Biometric screening can take place through at-home specimen self-collection or going to a lab in the network. There are many possibilities to make this virtual format fun, educational, and engaging while delivering a high participation rate.

Throughout the year, marketing employee wellness programming is key to getting people engaged. One way to do that is to share interactive digital health tools that make employees aware of health risks associated with their conditions. This can be done by providing personal risk assessments and then directing employees to the “care funnel” where they can access company programs designed to improve health and wellness. These might include a nutrition program, weight loss program, fitness program, disease management program, or a mental health program.



Most importantly, in order to make informed health decisions for themselves and their family members, employees need access to in-depth and wide-ranging health and wellness information they can trust. When employees don't have access to unbiased, high quality health and wellness content, they are left to search the Internet outside the company "safety zone" to find answers. Internet searches can lead to results that are full of misinformation, bias from medical advertisers, and unsupported or misleading health claims.

Finding a highly regarded digital health content provider and including that service as part of the overall employee benefit plan is the way to begin. The digital health content provider should be one that works with physicians and university researchers on the leading edge of healthcare to continually vet and update health and wellness information.

## Employee Health Engagement Beyond Covid-19

The impact of Covid-19 on how and where we work has been so dramatic and long-lasting that it will have ramifications for years to come. Expectations

will be that employees are able to access healthcare through telehealth and have a full health and wellness program delivered remotely. Now is the time to take advantage of this trend by investing in health and wellness services that can be delivered virtually and digitally designed to keep your employees and their families healthy.

### References

<sup>1</sup>"Delay or Avoidance of Medical Care Because of Covid-19-Related Concerns – United States, June 2020," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 11 Sept. 2020

<sup>2</sup>"Use and Content of Primary Care Office-Based vs Telemedicine Care Visits During the Covid-19 Pandemic in the US," *JAMA Network Open*, 2 Oct. 2020

<sup>3</sup>"Changes in the Number of US Patients With Newly Identified Cancer Before and During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) Pandemic," *JAMA Network Open*, 4 Oct. 2020

<sup>4</sup>"Telehealth: A quarter-trillion-dollar post-Covid-19 Reality?," *McKinsey & Company*, May 2020.



**Andrea Bloom** is the Founder and CEO of ConnectWell, a leading-edge provider of digital health and wellness content that is academically sourced and designed for a consumer audience. ConnectWell's content is sourced from the UC Berkeley School of Public Health, packaged for digital delivery with rich graphic content, and written for a wide-ranging consumer audience. ConnectWell licenses its content for integration into the platforms of a broad scope of healthcare companies, employers, and benefits providers to engage patients, employees, and members in their health and well-being.

