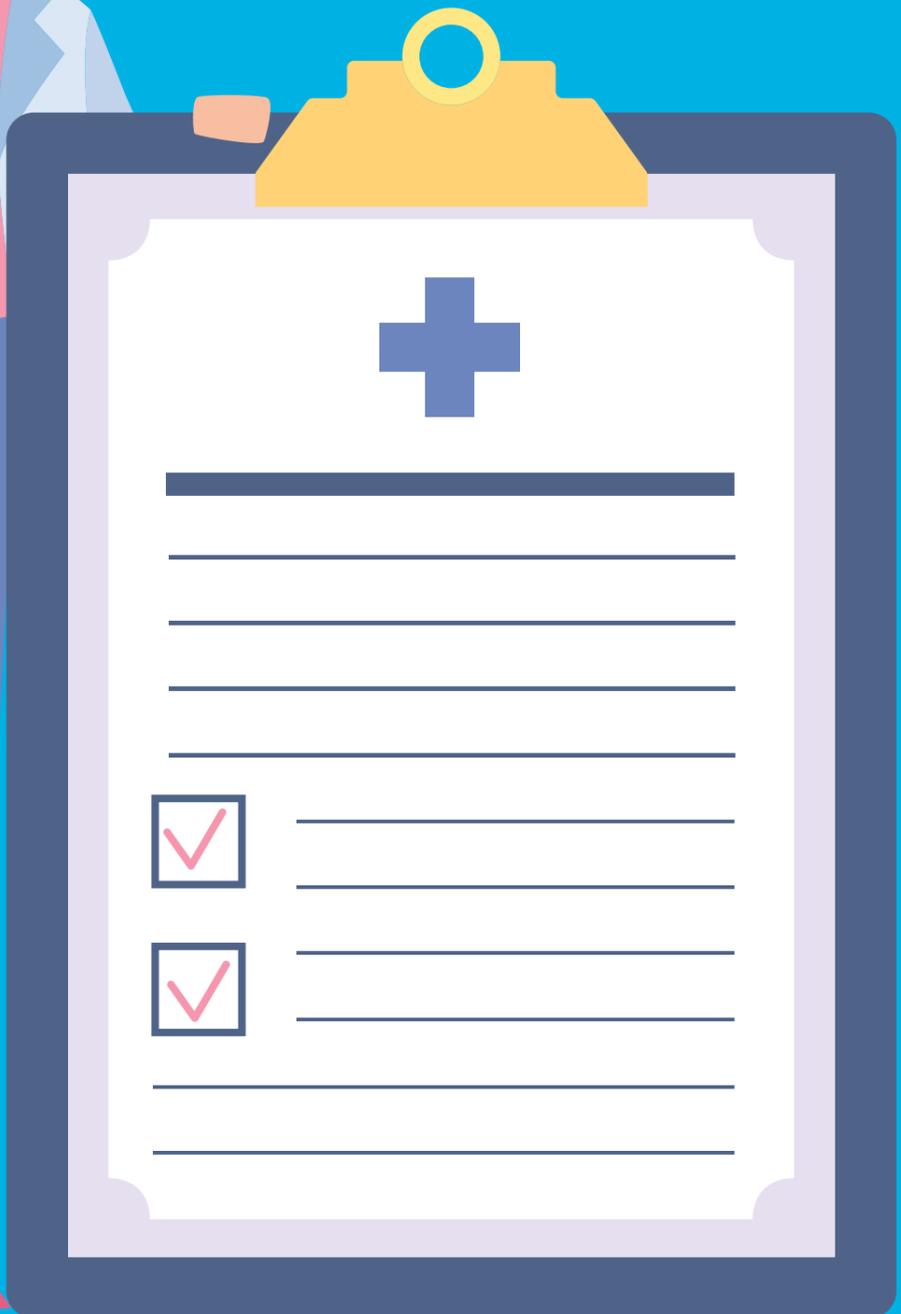
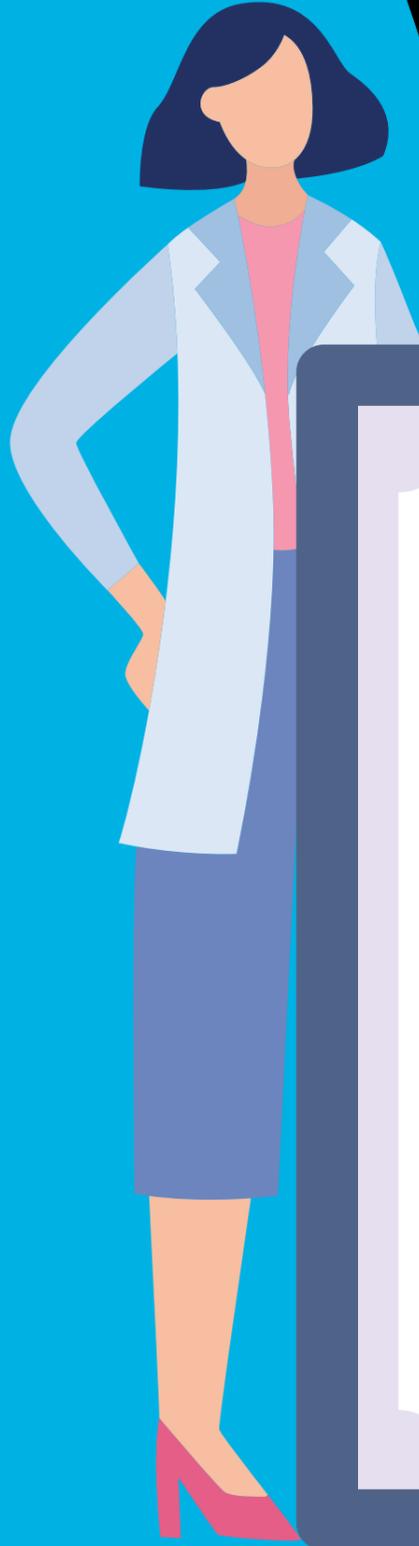


YOUR DOCTOR IS IN

Postponing medical visits or procedures because of COVID-19? Eight clinicians say it may be time to re-think. By Haley Longman



If you're one of those people who have been too nervous to go to the doctor's office during the pandemic, your fears are understandable. Why subject yourself to an exam room full of germs and a waiting room full of other humans if you don't have to? Such thinking goes double for elective procedures that can be rescheduled. It was only in late May, two months into the pandemic, after all, that Governor Murphy allowed the resumption of surgical procedures that weren't time-sensitive or medically necessary.

But New Jersey hospitals and medical offices have been strictly following guidelines from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for COVID-19. They routinely observe precautions such as temperature checks and screenings upon entrance; waiting in your car instead of in waiting rooms; patients and staff wearing masks, extensive disinfecting done between patients and at night; and telehealth appointments whenever possible. And many doctors insist it's safe to resume going for regular medical visits—and even for many elective procedures.

Well visits and checkups: Now that transmission rates of the virus are relatively low in New Jersey, experts say it's safe to resume well visits and checkups with your primary care physician. "All preventive procedures should be done now—do not wait to get blood work, a mammogram or a colonoscopy," says Elizabeth August, M.D., who practices family medicine at Riverside Medical Group's Ridgewood location. And the same rules apply for children, as it's especially important for the 18-and-under set to keep up with their vaccination schedules. "We would not want children to get sick with something that could have been prevented," she adds. Dr. August's practice is handling non-COVID-related sick visits in addition to routine checkups, and those who test positive for COVID-19 are seen via telemedicine every 48 hours to reduce in-person contact at the office.

Plastic surgery: Richard M. Winters, M.D., acting chairman of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at Hackensack University Medical Center and a partner at Cohen/Winters Plastic Surgery in Maywood, says that during the pandemic (once Murphy's ban on elective procedures was lifted), his practice has been performing both reconstructive and aesthetic procedures on patients considered low-risk for COVID-19. It has discouraged higher-risk patients from venturing out for elective surgeries, although "there are obviously certain reconstructive operations that are time-sensitive and medically necessary," he says. These include breast reconstruction after mastectomy for breast-cancer patients who are juggling adjuvant chemotherapy and radiation therapy, and "certain cancer reconstructions and resections where a delay [in surgery] would potentially worsen a patient's stage of disease or prognosis." And though Dr. Winters' practice doesn't focus on office-based procedures such as Botox—his specialties include "rhinoplasty, breast and body contouring, breast reconstruction, hand surgery and complex cancer reconstruction/extremity surgery"—he says that people at low risk of getting the

virus should feel comfortable continuing with these outpatient treatments. But he has one disclaimer if you're on the fence about it. "Think carefully about your own individual and family risk for COVID-19—and look critically at the data, the CDC guidelines and your own physician's recommendations in deciding to undergo purely elective procedures."

LASIK surgery: Experts have been telling us for months not to touch our eyes, nose or mouth when in public because that's one way the virus can be transmitted, but Richard Norden, M.D., physician-CEO at Norden Laser Eye in Ridgewood, believes that "the viral load is so low, even if someone sneezes in someone's eyes, the disease should not be transmitted through the conjunctiva [of the eyes]." For this reason, elective vision correction surgery is safe to undergo at this time, as long as precautions are taken. (For example, Dr. Norden's staff tapes the upper portion of patients' masks so as to block the passage of air.) In fact, he says, "in the last two months our practice has been busier than it's ever been as patients come in frustrated by their glasses

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being fogged up [from wearing masks] and not wanting to touch their faces by fiddling with their contact lenses." Moreover, many physicians such as Dr. Norden offer initial consultations via Zoom to limit face-to-face interaction, and the outpatient procedure and recovery for LASIK are just as they were pre-COVID: Virtually everyone can resume normal activities the next day.

Fertility treatment: "Pregnant women are potentially at a disadvantage if they contract the virus, meaning that a pregnant woman could get sicker than she might have if she weren't pregnant," says Catha Fischer, M.D., of Reproductive Medicine Associates (RMA) New Jersey in Englewood. The good news, though, is that "no authority has recommended avoiding, postponing or terminating a pregnancy due to COVID-19," says Maria Costantini-Ferrando, M.D., Ph.D., of the same practice. Throughout the pandemic, RMA has "continued to perform medically necessary D&Cs [dilations and curettages] and egg retrievals, as we do not want to deny our patients the opportunity to preserve their fertility," Dr. Costantini-Ferrando tells BERGEN. RMA has also resumed other in-office procedures such as saline sonograms and embryo transfers, and doctors are reviewing third-party cases—in which there is a need for either egg or embryo donation or a gestational carrier—on a case-by-case basis. In sum? "Any procedure that is affected by the aging of the patient should not be postponed," says Dr. Costantini-Ferrando.

Weight-loss surgery: Several recent studies have shown that obesity puts an individual at a higher risk of contracting the coronavirus, along with an increased risk of requiring intubation and a stay in an intensive care unit, says Melissa Bagloo, M.D., of the Center for Bariatric Surgery & Weight-Loss Management at Valley Hospital in Ridgewood. This, she says, is why weight-loss surgery is now perhaps more important than ever. "Weight loss can improve many of the medical problems that increase the risks of COVID—diabetes, hypertension and pulmonary comorbidities," she tells BERGEN. "Weight loss would improve the overall health status of our patients and decrease the risks of COVID." For this reason, Dr. Bagloo does not recommend delaying bariatric surgery. "COVID is well controlled in our area, and Valley Hospital has implemented many changes to minimize the risk of COVID transmission," she says.

Joint replacement: If you're having chronic pain in the hip/shoulder/knee/spine, an orthopedic specialist will likely try more conservative treatments such as oral anti-inflammatories, rest and activity modification before recommending surgery, says Robert Kayal, M.D., founder, president and CEO of Kayal Orthopaedic Center, with locations in Franklin Lakes, Paramus, Westwood, Glen Rock and Garfield. But if nothing has been working and there is intractable pain that affects a patient's quality of life, surgery will be indicated and should not be put off. "If the fractures are not reduced in a timely manner, loss of function, deformity and chronic pain can result," Dr. Kayal says. But it's safe to undergo such procedures right now: Kayal Ortho is following CDC sanitization and social distancing guidelines, and will only perform surgeries on patients who test negative for COVID-19. Dr. Kayal says it's safe to continue with physical therapy now too, even though many were afraid to do so at the beginning of the pandemic. "Now patients are more open to physical therapy due to the intense safety measures we've employed at our facilities," he says. But if your condition is not debilitating? The doc recommends rescheduling such surgeries and, in the interim, working with your physician to treat the symptoms more conservatively with medication, injections and therapy.

Orthodontic work: Although oral health visits don't allow for patients to wear a mask during exams, all dental and orthodontic offices that are taking the proper protocols are safer than ever to visit, these professionals say. "The medical-grade industrial air purification coupled with even more rigorous disinfection protocols and health screenings prior to visits ensures that our team, our patients and their families are maximally protected," says Russell Sandman, D.M.D., at Bergen Orthodontics in Closter. And he goes further. "It can be argued that the post-pandemic age of public masks and social distancing is the perfect time to achieve the smile you've always wanted," Dr. Sandman tells BERGEN. "There should be no concern about the pursuit of oral health in the age of COVID."