

Spring is here and so is asthma season

HEALTHY LIVING



Stephen Caminiti, MD

After a long winter, our weather has finally improved. Spring has arrived, and many of us wish to enjoy the warmth. Unfortunately, for people who suffer from allergies and asthma, this may result in health issues. Fortunately, proper treatment for people who have asthma can allow them to enjoy being outdoors without significant symptoms.

Asthma is a respiratory disease characterized by coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. Wheezing, the hallmark symptom of asthma, results from constriction

of breathing passages, leading to difficulty exhaling, or getting the air out. The cause of asthma is not known, although genetics plays a significant role. Children with a parent who has asthma are more likely to develop the disease. Exposure to cigarette smoke in childhood significantly increases your chance of developing asthma. Asthma can occur after a respiratory infection and can also result from certain occupational and other environmental exposures. Once asthma has developed, many factors can lead to its worsening, including allergies, irritants such as cigarette smoke, perfumes, and ozone, as well as respiratory infections.

The treatment of asthma has improved significantly over the last 20 years. The goal of treatment is to allow patients to have as normal a life as possible with as few symp-

toms as possible. This has become a reality for the vast number of patients. There are a large number of world class athletes with asthma, attesting to the effectiveness of our treatments. If you have asthma symptoms two to three times a week, you should be on daily preventative treatment.

No patient should assume that nothing can be done to improve your condition. Anyone with asthma who has symptoms more than twice a week should contact their physician to see what more can be done to improve their asthma control.

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Mark Matulaitis posing with his laptop that he uses for virtual house calls with his neurologist in his home in Salisbury, Md.

The doctor will see you via webcam, smartphone

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mark Matulaitis holds out his arms so the Parkinson's specialist can check his tremors. But this is no doctor's office: Matulaitis sits in his rural Maryland home as a neurologist a few hundred miles away examines him via the camera in his laptop.

Welcome to the virtual house call, the latest twist on telemedicine. It's increasingly getting attention as a way to conveniently diagnose simple maladies, such as whether that runny nose and cough is a cold or the flu. One company even offers a smartphone app that lets tech-savvy consumers connect to a doctor for \$49 a visit.

Now patient groups and technology advocates are pushing to expand the digital care to people with complex chronic diseases that make a doctor's trip more than just an inconvenience.

"Why can't we provide care to people wherever they are?" asks Dr. Ray Dorsey, a neurologist at the University of Rochester Medical Center who is leading a national study of video visits for Parkinson's patients and sees broader appeal.

"Think of taking your mom with Alzheimer's to a big urban medical center. Just getting through the parking lot they're disoriented," he adds. "That's the standard of care but is it what we should be doing?"

Among the hurdles: While Medicare covers some forms of telehealth, it doesn't typically pay for in-home video exams.

Plus, doctors who practice via video-chat must be licensed in whatever states their long-distance patients live. Some states restrict the kind of care and prescribing available via telemedicine.

About 40 percent of Parkinson's patients don't see a specialist, in part because they live too far away, even though research suggests those who do fare better, according to the Parkinson's Action Network.

When Matulaitis first was diagnosed in 2011, his wife had to take a day off work to drive him more than two hours to a Parkinson's clinic. Once he was stabilized on medication, Dorsey enrolled the Salisbury, Md., man in a pilot study of video house calls. Set-up was simple: The doctor emailed a link to video software designed for patient privacy.

He's thrilled with the care.

"It's just the same as if you've ever done Facetime on an iPhone," explained Matulaitis, 59, who continues his virtual check-ups with Dorsey a few times a year. "It allows the doctor to see the patient at a point where they are at their best."

Telemedicine is broader than a Skype-like doctor visit. For years, doctors have delivered different forms of care remotely, from the old-fashioned phone call to at-home monitors that measure someone's blood pressure and beam the information to a clinic. Hospitals routinely set up on-site video consultations with specialists.

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