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E-visits turn computer into medical exam room

Patients save money, time with online doctor's advice

By Claudia Pinto
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Good luck trying to find a doctor who makes house calls. But in a modern-day twist on the old-fashioned practice, more and more physicians are willing to come to your computer.

Online house calls, also called e-visits, let established patients go to their doctor's Web site, enter their symptoms and receive advice online. Doctors who offer the service will even fill prescriptions if needed.

"It's not meant to replace a traditional doctor's visit," said Dr. Steve Samudrala, medical director of <http://www.afdclinics.com/> style="color:#af3814;text-decoration:underline;">" > America's Family Doctors walk-in clinics, which has offices in Brentwood, Smyrna and Spring Hill. "But it's a nice option for people who don't want to take time off of work or just want to stay in bed. I think the patients who appreciate it the most are the ones who get sick when they're out of town."

Online house calls can be used to diagnose and treat minor illnesses, such as a urinary tract infection, a sinus infection or a sprained knee. Dr. Susan Andrews, with <http://www.familypracticepartners.com/> style="color:#af3814;text-decoration:underline;">" > Family Practice Partners in Murfreesboro, said the online program asks patients detailed questions and allows them to post any additional information they think would be relevant.

"I feel comfortable that it's asked about the things I would have asked about," Andrews said.

Costs range from \$25 to \$45 for the service — which can be accessed even when the office is closed — and patients are promised a response within one business day. Samudrala said the information goes straight to his Blackberry, and he's typically able to get back to patients within a few hours.

Even fans of online house calls acknowledge that there are downsides, though.

"You don't have the benefit of a physical examination," said Dr. Jim Jirjis, <http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/> style="color:#af3814;text-decoration:underline;">" > Vanderbilt Medical Center's director of general internal medicine and chief medical information officer. "You can't listen to their heart and lungs."

And there's always the risk that a patient won't recognize the significance of a symptom and it will go unreported. Still, Jirjis believes the future of online house calls is promising as long as doctors and patients recognize its limitations.

Samudrala and Andrews agree. They say if symptoms are deemed too complex to treat online, patients will be told to come in for an appointment. Also, there are certain complaints, such as acute chest pain, that will prompt the program to alert patients to seek medical care immediately.

Keeping kids well

Joyce Huseman isn't a doctor, but after 17 years of parenting she says she can easily diagnose a sinus infection, an ear infection or strep throat.

She said with four children, her family has probably used the service 20 times for minor illnesses.

"This way I'm not taking my kids into an environment where they are likely to pick up more germs or more viruses," said Huseman of Brentwood.

Huseman said the service also comes in handy because her family does a fair amount of traveling.

"My children can't get sick when it's convenient," she said. "It's happened in three different states."

Once they were on a ski trip in a remote area of Vermont when her son got a sinus infection. Samudrala, who is Huseman's doctor, found a pharmacy in a nearby town where they could pick up a prescription.

"Within a day my son was better and skiing again," Huseman said. "It made our whole trip worthwhile."

Samudrala and Andrews said that online house calls make up just a small part of their practice. They only get a few each week.

But Jirjis predicts online house calls will become much more popular.

"The world has changed. Ten years ago people were not online," Jirjis said. "Now there's online banking, with Netflix people are getting their movies online. People are starting to want health care online. We are not going to go back . . . so it's here."

"People are busier and busier. It's hard to take time off of work to go to the doctor. All these forces are making these services more desirable."

While online house calls are two to three times cheaper than traditional doctor's visits, Jirjis said the service probably won't skyrocket until it's covered by insurance. Local health officials said there are insurance companies that cover these types of online house calls in other states, but not in Tennessee.

Jirjis expects that will change with time.

"Money is saved on time missed from work. Money is saved on more expensive office visits," Jirjis said. "It's a win-win."

Additional Facts

HOW DO ONLINE HOUSE CALLS WORK?

- >> Go to a participating doctor's Web site and click on the online house calls link.
- >> In a secured portal, established patients are asked to note any allergies and list medications they may be taking.
- >> Patients enter their symptoms or choose from a drop-down list of conditions, such as sinus infection.
- >> Patients answer a series of questions about their symptoms or condition. For example, if they've reported that they may have a sinus infection they'll be asked about the color of their drainage, whether they have a cough or fever, etc.
- >> Patients also have the option of submitting any comments they think are relevant, or they can send attachments, such as a digital image of a rash or an audio file of a cough.

- >> If patients need meds, they can list their preferred pharmacy for pickup.
 - >> Patients enter credit card information to pay for the virtual visit.
 - >> Doctors will respond to patients within one business day — but typically within a few hours — asking them to check their account. Patients can then log on to their account to receive a diagnosis, treatment advice and information about prescriptions.
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