

Online Consultation: What you Need to Know

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Why is Online Consultation needed? We all know that coming to the office is not always convenient. Between lost travel time, gasoline, childcare, and Co-pays, this represents a real monetary outlay. We have all had the experience of making an appointment with a professional, such as a dentist, physician, accountant, or attorney, where the face-to-face meeting time with our advisor was only a fraction of the time spent to accomplish the visit. First there is the phone call to set up the appointment. Although we strive to keep time spent on hold to a minimum, it is often un-avoidable. Then there is the time coordinating schedules with our staff to find an appropriate time (using our web site to make in-person appointments would be a free alternative to spending time on hold). Taking time off from work, and scheduling between conflicting levels of priority, can also be difficult. Finally driving takes up time, especially if you leave extra travel time to arrive a few minutes before the scheduled appointment and account for traffic.

Patients are eligible for Online Consultation if they are already an established patient at Alabama Allergy & Asthma Clinic (on whom we have a chart) and who have been seen within a reasonable length of time. Online Consultation allows you to get the individualized medical advice without having to come into the office. Our web site, administered by MEDEM, provides secure encrypted messaging. Obviously this "virtual office visit" is for information sharing, not for problems that might require a physical exam. Online Consultation is ideal for the overworked executive, the busy teacher or professor who can't be reached by phone easily, the out-of-town college student, and the on-the-go homemaker. Since time is such a valuable resource, our office is a leader in using 21st century technology to save on this valuable commodity through Online Consultation. While most problems will still require us to sit face to face in the same room, there are many instances where we can provide you with as much, if not more, individualized information through an electronic meeting. We can provide links to other web sites that specifically answer your questions or concerns.

Some specific examples of problems appropriate for Online Consultation include advice on new medication therapies, and medication dosage changes. Patients who need refills, and are over-due for a follow-up visit, can answer questions on-line, and perhaps be able to get needed refills sooner than if they scheduled an in person visit. Patients with chronic hives and nasal allergies are generally good candidates for this service. Patients with detailed questions, who are concerned some of the information they want to communicate to the doctor may be lost in the interpretation of talking to the nurse, may have interest in using an Online Consultation to communicate directly with the doctor. Patients with an urgent concern or problem should continue to use the telephone.

Access to Online Consultation is available through registration on this web site. To sign up for this service go to new user LOG ON and follow the prompts. After registering our office will confirm that you are an established patient and then activate your Online Consultation privileges; this process may take up to 2 business days. You will receive an email confirmation when your registration is "active." You will also be presented with a "Terms of Service" agreement that explains your responsibilities and our responsibilities regarding online communication. Read the waivers and terms: these are very important as they deal with medical liability and your rights using electronic communication. Once you have

accepted this agreement, you will have access to Online Consultation and will need to complete a form to request personalized medical advice online. Just login then click on "send or check messages" to begin an Online Consultation.

A charge of \$30 per Online Consultation will be billed to your credit card. Online Consultation is NOT a covered benefit under any insurance program we know about. However, it may qualify for reimbursement by your Flexible Medical Benefit Plan or Medical Savings Account. Of course, you are welcome to make an appointment in the office for these same issues in order to use your insurance benefits. This service is for those patients for whom time saving and convenience is a higher priority and an exam is not necessary. The fee for this service will be charged to your credit card only if we determine that your question can be adequately addressed on line and provide a response. If we feel that the topic cannot be adequately addressed in this manner, you will receive a reply to that effect, and your credit card will NOT be charged. Your credit card will only be charged once, even though you may be required to enter your credit card number more than once to complete our exchange. Online Consultation may not be for everyone. It is meant for those busy professionals for whom time truly is money. We plan to give Online Consultation priority handling, and hope to eventually respond to an Online Consultation faster than we typically respond to a phone call (unfortunately 1 to 4 hours depending on the volume). Some may ask, why is there a charge for this service since email and phone calls are free? Standard email is NOT secure or encrypted, and is more like sending your confidential medical information on a postcard. Besides being a bad idea, it is illegal under the new federal privacy guidelines. Similar to on-line banking, the infrastructure needed to setup and maintain secure messaging to meet these federal standards is expensive, and cannot be delivered for free. Remember also, we envision Online Consultation as a replacement for a detailed office visit, not to replace asking a simple question on the phone. As with any professional, our time is money, and the advice you get from a physician is not free, whether in-person, on-line, or on the phone. In the past physicians use a method called "cost shifting" to provide services that on the surface seemed free. These services were compensated through higher fees for other procedures. In the 21st century, this is no longer possible, since insurers only pay for what is actually done at the time of the service. We hope you find Online Consultation a beneficial option for meeting your healthcare needs.