

Virtual care

COVID-19 is placing stress on Canada's public health system. Our clinic is starting to offer virtual care to make sure that we can continue to care for our patients safely and effectively. This means that we will be using electronic communications for almost all patient visits rather than asking patients to come into our office. Some of these technologies are provided by the Province. Others have been provided by vendors such as Google, Apple or EMR (electronic medical record) companies, such as QHR, that we use, to help make discussions with your care provider as easy as possible during these difficult times. Some health concerns can be addressed with virtual care alone, but in some cases your doctor may ask you to visit a hospital or other health-care facility, if necessary, for a physical examination. We do our best to make sure that any information you give to us during virtual care visits is private and secure, but no electronic communications tools (such as audio, video, email, text) are ever completely secure. There is an increased security risk that your health information may be intercepted or disclosed to third parties when using such electronic communications tools. To help us keep your information safe and secure, you can:

- Understand that electronic communications (such as audio, video, email, text) you receive are not secure in the same way as a private appointment in an exam room.
- Use a private computer/device (i.e., not an employer's or third party's computer/device), secure accounts, and a secure internet connection. For example, using a personal and encrypted email account is more secure than an unencrypted email account, and your access to the Internet on your home network will generally be more secure than an open guest Wi-Fi connection.
- You should also understand that virtual care is not a substitute for in-person communication or clinical examinations, where appropriate, or for going to an Emergency Department when needed (including for any urgent care that may be required).
- If you are concerned about using electronic communications for virtual care, you can ask our office to attempt to arrange a potential alternative. However, please note that visiting a health care provider in person comes with a higher risk of coming into contact with COVID-19 and the possibility of spreading the virus.

By providing your information, you agree to let us collect, use, or disclose your personal health information through video, audio, email, or text communications (while following applicable privacy laws) to provide you with care. In particular, the following means of electronic communication may be used: audio, video (including Skype, Facetime, Medeo, etc.), email, text.

At this time, the Ontario Medical Association, and the Canadian Medical Protective Association have recommended that patients be asked to consent to virtual care and also to unencrypted email, since most patients, and most physicians, do not currently have access to encrypted email.

Unfortunately, the Ministry of Health, and OHIP(Ontario Health Insurance Plan) have not yet agreed upon reimbursement for email, or electronic prescriptions (faxing and web-based electronic prescribing, between physician offices and pharmacists), but there are billing codes for “virtual care” provided by the following mechanisms :

- 1) phone calls to patients
- 2) phone calls between family physicians and specialists
- 3) video calls to patients
- 4) electronic consultation (e-consult)-a secure web-based process of a physician asking an opinion of a specialist.

Dr. Lalor participates in all the above, and will also provide prescriptions for patients seen in the past 12 months. Dr Lalor and his staff will use limited email, but currently cannot use email to answer clinical questions, i.e. questions about symptoms, diagnosis or treatment. Email will be used primarily to collect information, i.e. patient questionnaire, and will also be used to schedule appointments.

Special notice :

Virtual Care has some inherent privacy and security risks that your health information may be intercepted or unintentionally disclosed. We want to make sure you understand this before we proceed. In order to improve privacy and confidentiality, you should also take steps to participate in Virtual Care in a private setting, using encrypted email if available, and you should not use and employers or someone else’s computer/device as they may be able to access your information.

If it is determined that you require physical exam you may still need to be assessed in person. You should also understand that virtual care is not a substitute for attending the Emergency Department if urgent care as needed. If you continue to communicate with Dr. Lalor, please be clear that you are consenting to the use of electronic communication to provide you with care.