

Worrying trend as check ups drop off during pandemic

The poll conducted among 40 general practitioners comparing the number of consultations in May to previous years shows a worrying trend that could be putting thousands of lives at risk.



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While many with minor ailments may be staying away as a result of the lockdown, the poll shows that even those with life-threatening illnesses are forgoing regular check-ups. Apart from a general waning in patient consultations, cardiology consultations too have plummeted by 90%, said Dr Anna-Marie Grebe, medical consultant to Pharma Dynamics, which conducted the survey.

She said the Covid-19 pandemic must not be taken lightly, but the 1,13-billion people with hypertension worldwide and the 10-million people who die every year from hypertension-related conditions such as stroke, heart failure and renal failure should not be overlooked.

“Covid-19 cases and deaths are still growing, and we certainly encourage patients to follow the proper safety protocol related to the pandemic, but patients must not neglect monitoring and treatment of hypertension and its complications.

“If we assume that the prevalence for heart attacks and strokes have remained unchanged, the rapid decline in consultations indicate that many may simply be too scared to go for their regular check-ups out of fear of contracting Covid-19 at a hospital or clinic.”

Some GPs have reported patients suffering fatal heart attacks as a result of opting to remain at home rather than to seek medical attention early on. Doctors fear that should the troubling trend go unchecked, many more could suffer the same fate.

Chronic conditions

Grebe urged patients with chronic illnesses, such as heart disease, hypertension and diabetes to seek immediate care if they experience any symptoms, even if they believe these may be unrelated to their underlying condition.

“The trouble with patients who have high blood pressure, is that they often have no symptoms, which is why it is referred to as the ‘silent killer’. Therefore, it is essential that patients go to see their doctor for regular blood pressure and physical check-ups. Those who have access to digital technology, such as ABPM monitors or wearable patches that can accurately monitor blood pressure at home, should share this info with doctors on a regular basis to help physicians control their condition and to take early action, when necessary.”

Diabetes too is a serious and complex condition and an emergency can arise for a variety of reasons.

Global trend

Reports from around the globe suggest that Covid-19 has instilled a similar fear of face-to-face medical care. Doctors from Hong Kong reported an increase in patients coming to the hospital late after suffering a heart attack; researchers in Spain noted a 40% reduction in emergency procedures for heart attacks during the pandemic compared to a few weeks earlier. In an informal Twitter poll among an online community of cardiologists in New York, almost half of the respondents reported that they too have seen a 40 to 60% drop in admissions for heart attacks.

“We understand that people fear getting infected with Covid-19, but if they’re living with a serious health condition, the best way to manage it is with the help of their healthcare practitioner. Based on poll, 92% of doctors still prefer face-to-face consultations, but 74% said they are open to virtual consultations to help patients manage their health.

“Healthcare staff across the country have implemented stringent infection control measures at doctors’ rooms and clinics to protect patients. Hospitals have also separated Covid-19 patients from others seeking care. Medical personnel have had to change the rhythm of their daily lives – some are sleeping away from their families and performing meticulous cleansing rituals – making the health and safety of patients their number one priority.

“Patients can rest assured that hospitals and clinics are equipped not only to care for those with Covid-19, but also those who have other life-threatening illnesses,” said Grebe.

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