

# Free virtual medical consultations for all South Africans

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*Bonitas Medical Fund announced that it has extended its free virtual medical consultations to all South Africans. This facility includes medical advice about Covid-19, other medical problems, the writing of prescription, where necessary and free delivery of chronic medication.*

Telemedicine was originally developed to reach remote patients living in rural areas. It has now become a critical tool as the world reels under the Covid-19 outbreak. Half the world is staying at home and virtual medical consultations are emerging as an effective and sustainable solution for precaution, prevention and treatment to stem the spread of Covid-19.

Medical practitioners, nationally, have echoed the president's instructions and sent out an urgent plea to South Africans to stay at home. Not only to prevent the spread of the virus but to protect the healthcare workers who play a vital role in treating patients.

Bonitas has heeded this plea – making it possible for more people to do just that. The development of the *Virtual Care App* was announced at the fund's launch last year and scheduled to launch this month. It has since been adapted and expanded to help alleviate the burden on healthcare workers at this critical time while making quality healthcare accessible to all South Africans.

Lee Callakoppen, principal officer of Bonitas Medical Fund, announced that Virtual Care is available to both members and non-members for free online consultations and, where necessary, prescriptions for medicine. He says: "I'm proud to announce that this new dimension of virtual care, using the Bonitas Member App, will be available to all South Africans from today."

## *How it works*

Whether you are a Bonitas member or not, you simply register on the Bonitas Mobile App and book an online consultation with a doctor from the extensive network of family practitioners. The doctor will then engage with you in a virtual video consultation on any medical issue, not just around the Covid-19 virus and advise you on the most clinically



*Lee Callakoppen, principal officer of Bonitas Medical Fund*

appropriate steps for further care. “To ensure the solution is as comprehensive as possible,” says Callakoppen, “we’ve partnered with Afrocentric Health and Pharmacy Direct so that any chronic medication needed will be delivered to your doorstep.”

“It is important to note,” he says, “that doctors will advise and treat you within the guidelines set out by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HSPCA). If this is not possible and you need physical examination and care, they will refer you to the nearest healthcare facility.”

#### *Home delivery of medication crucial*

Gawie Erasmus, CEO of Pharmacy Direct, says: “The delivery of chronic medicines to patients will play a crucial role in this innovative solution. We are a nationwide courier pharmacy who delivers prescribed chronic medication to a variety of patients.

“Getting medication to patients has always been critical but even more so with Covid-19 and the need for social distancing. To date, we have a 99.9% service level score to the patients in our care. We will ensure this continues by extending our working hours and adhering to stringent hygiene measures, including contactless delivery and drivers hand sanitising before and after each delivery.”

#### *Virtual consultations during the pandemic*

Dr Rani Elenjical, part of the virtual consulting team, says: “Internationally, we have seen that virtual consultations have helped alleviate some of the strain on the healthcare system caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

“Telemedicine offers a real-time consultation with patients. Through a video conferencing platform doctors can provide medical advice and, to a limited extent, diagnose patients. They are able to prescribe medications and advise about different treatment modalities for their patients. It also helps to streamline care coordination by ensuring that patients have access to primary healthcare first. This saves time using online triage (the degree of urgency) to evaluate symptoms and concerns.

“In the current pandemic, it is helping to bridge the gap between doctors and patients, enabling everyone, especially symptomatic patients, to stay at home and communicate through virtual channels,” explains Dr Elenjical.

#### *It's not just for Covid-19*

People who are suffering from other medical ailments during this time can receive care from home, without entering medical facilities, minimising their risk of contracting the virus.

Callakoppen says: “What differentiates this service from others is that it is available for consultations on all illnesses and ailments for which you would normally see your GP – all from the comfort of your home. This will help to ensure you comply with the requirements of the lockdown while staying safe and protecting others. The consultation is free during the Covid-19 lockdown period, but all acute medicine is for your account. Pharmacy Direct will assist you in making sure you get the best value for money on your chronic medication. Delivery of chronic medication is also free of charge.

“We are here to support all South Africans to limit their exposure to the virus, while still receiving quality healthcare. Together, we can make it through the worst of this,” says Callakoppen.

For more information on how to download the Bonitas Member App visit [www.bonitas.co.za](http://www.bonitas.co.za). The app is available to download on the Google Play Store and the iStore. Bonitas members will need to log in to access the features available while non-members can register for a virtual consultation.

You can also stay updated on all coronavirus-related topics by visiting the Covid-19 Information Hub at [www.bonitas.co.za/home/covid](http://www.bonitas.co.za/home/covid). The hub is updated regularly to keep you abreast of the situation.

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