



Cover your  
face



Wash your  
hands



Socially  
distance

I hope you are all well. It's been about a week since the last Update. Unfortunately, the coronavirus did not take a week off.

As you probably know by now, there are outbreaks in many states in the Midwest and south that were "spared" earlier in the pandemic. The west, including California, Arizona, Texas and New Mexico continue as hot spots. And we are seeing rising cases in New Jersey and Rhode Island with many cases attributed to what New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy called "knuckleheads" attending large parties. Massachusetts is also seeing some rising numbers in the Boston area and the Cape (though not yet at the level that would cause Governor Baker to roll back the Reopen Massachusetts plan).

What to do about schools. Prior to last week, it was said that reopening schools in states where new cases were low and the case positivity rate was low, was acceptable. There may be some rethinking of that for in-person instruction now. The few school districts across the country that have opened already for in person instruction are finding viral outbreaks. And kids can get sick from coronavirus and they can also spread the virus. I think we'll see some reconsideration soon. At the least, there will have to be much more support to school systems for equipment, sanitizing, training, and testing/contact tracing to make school reopening safe and successful.

What can be done? Short of a vaccine, the best things to do are what we already know: wear masks, socially distance, wash your hands, don't come to work if sick, AND definitely do not attend large gatherings (especially indoors); that would qualify for the "Knucklehead Hall of Fame" that the NJ Governor is opening.

Here's what wearing a mask can do to make you a life saver (sent to me by Stephanie, an article by John Bollard in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*):



So help yourself (and others) save lives! (and pass the article along to family and friends who may need convincing).

Or do what Major League Baseball (MLB) is doing. Is anyone surprised that ballplayers are getting sick in record numbers? The virus spreads like a ..... virus. And even great athletes get sick (who, presumably, are strong and have “good immune systems). MLB should have a whole floor reserved in the KHOF (Knucklehead Hall....).

OK. The “Good News.” Yesterday, the President signed an executive order that effectively makes Medicare payments for telehealth permanent for most recipients. That is especially good news now but also into the future. And the federal government is now working on plans for vaccine distribution (when it becomes available) based on previous plans for large scale flu vaccine distribution. Let’s hope they have it ready in time and that it is well thought out.

### At VMG

Not surprisingly then, masks are required at Valley Medical Group for staff, practitioners, patients, and visitors. Gina reports that a question arose regarding exception for religious reasons. There is no exception for religious reasons. The only exceptions identified by Massachusetts DPH are for *situations that may inhibit an individual from wearing a face-mask safely. These may include, but are not limited to:*

- *Those who cannot breathe safely;*
- *Those who, due to a behavioral health diagnosis, are unable to do so;*
- *Those communicating with people who rely upon lip-reading;*
- *Those who require supplemental oxygen to breathe; and*
- *Those who are exercising outdoors and are able to keep physical distance from others.*

If a patient is not able to wear a mask they should be scheduled for a virtual visit. See Gina's recent emails for more information.

Flu season is coming. We're planning for procedures to vaccinate lots of patients this year, and, lots of staff also. We'll have more to say about how we're going to do this soon.

We're also beginning to plan for COVID testing. More to come on that as well in the next few weeks.

From Colleen: "The Eye Care/Optical departments have faced our own unique struggles with the pandemic the past 4 plus months and we are now preparing to reopen for in person patient care on August 11th in EHC. The Eye Care department in NHC has been moved to EHC, to support NHC's respiratory unit. Significant work has taken place to support this move and prepare for patient care.

The optical shop at NHC has closed and we are preparing to reopen the Amherst Optical shop, which has been redesigned to be able to support customers during the pandemic. Anticipated opening is the week of August 11th, by appointment only.

Here's a graph, from Isaac Allen, showing VMG charges over time since the pandemic began. The green line is 2020; the red line (not the MTA) is 2019. We are recovering our charges mostly due to virtual visits.



Podiatry and Radiology continue to grow in number of visits, and Physical Therapy is increasing past 60%. Behavioral Health, Diabetes Education and Nutrition, Endocrinology, Rheumatology, Sports Medicine, Ambulatory Surgery (ASPC), and primary care are either at or above 2019 levels or climbing to get there. Eye Care, as above, will begin recovery later this month. Thanks to all of you for providing access for our patients and teamwork (including reception and clinical staff) to get them in. We've all changed a lot of processes and workflows in the last few months and it is paying off.

Right now our biggest risks are from lapses. So please continue to do what works:

- Please wash your hands (often),
- Don't touch your face,
- Maintain social/physical distancing (it works),
- Definitely wear a mask (it is not a political statement; it's a public health good), (and for those patients and others who wear their masks without covering their mouth and nose, help them understand that both are necessary)
- Don't come to work if you fell sick,
- Continue to be in touch with and take care of each other, and help to educate everyone.

Joel

*Be patient; be mindful*