

VMG COVID-19 UPDATE

March 23, 2020

Issue #5

In order to slow the spread of the virus, Governor Baker has ordered all non-essential businesses in the state of Massachusetts to close beginning tomorrow at noon until noon on April 7. He is also directing the Department of Public Health to issue a “stay-at-home” advisory to limit all unnecessary activities, especially for those over 70. VMG is an essential business because continuing to provide healthcare services is essential to the public’s health, safety and welfare. For these reasons, we are staying open, though we have, in the space of the last 10 days, essentially redesigned a lot of what we do (more of that below).

Essential and Non-Essential

You’ve probably heard a lot about “essential” and “non-essential” employees. Whichever category your work is in, these terms do not mean that your work is not important to VMG. The terms are only used to designate which employees must report to our place of business to work during this public health emergency. Essential employees are those who are needed at the health center to allow us to continue to provide care to patients. These employees include, but may not be limited to, practitioners, nurses, medical assistants, phlebotomists, radiology staff, medical technologists, receptionists, custodians, couriers and most members of our leadership team.

At VMG we have been actively working to move our non-essential employees (as well as some of our essential employees who can be spared because we have reduced the number of patients we’re seeing in our health centers) out of the office in order to implement and maximize social distancing as a means of slowing the spread of the virus. However, not all of our patient care and work can be performed from home.

It’s important to remember that as we see more patients in the health centers (either because we are seeing more illness or because, in the future, we are returning to normal volumes) we will be moving employees who have been sent home to return to the office so that we can continue to provide needed services to our patients.

Recent Changes

Because of the growing spread of the virus, every patient contact involves a risk- benefit decision. For younger patients, if they visit the health center without urgent need, it increases the risk for practitioners and staff. For older patients if their need is not urgent we increase their risk. We need to make sure that bringing a patient in for a visit will urgently make a difference in their health so as to be worth the risk.

For this reason, we are now seeing almost all patients by Telemedicine; virtual visits by Zoom, Doxy, other platforms or, in some cases, by telephone. The only exceptions are urgent patients who have been through triage and were told to be seen in person by triage nurses or practitioners. All normal, routine follow-ups, wellness visits, and physicals, routine labs and routine radiology are not being seen in the health centers. This is to reduce risk to other patients and staff and to slow the spread of the virus by social distancing. We are seeing urgent patients with respiratory symptoms in our designated spaces in the health centers by our designated teams.

Based on some new recommendations, we are now asking all practitioners and clinical staff in direct patient contact to be wearing masks.

New Federal FMLA and Other Benefit Changes

We have not yet finalized all the information coming from Congress and the federal government but we are aware of some changes to FMLA and other programs because of the pandemic. These will create some safeguards for both well and sick employees going forward. We'll have more to say about these before the end of the week.

Anyone Feeling Stress?

Now that's a stupid question. Here are some ideas:

- If you are spending a lot of time on social or other media watching the news or listening to people talking about the pandemic, **stop!** Listen to music, read a comic book, try a new recipe, talk with a friend, hang out with a pet, etc.
- Connect with others. There is a new word: "social closening." Talk with friends and family, **actually talk**, by phone or by video (zoom, face time, etc.). Talking with others helps. And, try making sure that you are also talking about things other than the pandemic. Set a goal to talk with others at least once a day.
- Mindfulness. If you don't have a method you are fond of or never tried it, use one of the free apps like Calm or Headspace. You can get these on your phone or on the web. Or just google mindfulness for other ideas.

- Exercise. Go for a walk, stretch, whatever your favorite is, do it often. It doesn't have to be intense to get some benefit.

Here's a quote: "The only thing more contagious than a virus is hope."
Admiral William McRaven

There's been a lot of change at VMG and in our communities these last several days. There will be a lot more in the coming days and weeks. Believe in each other, take care of each other, and, that Hope thing. We will get through this.

Thanks again for all you do.

Joel