

Keep up with children's health during pandemic. Especially now, pediatricians can help.

With schools closed, a doctor may now be the only person outside a household with eyes on a child. Don't skip well-child appointments and vaccines.

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COVID-19 has drastically changed how we live our lives and brought much of the world to a standstill. It's a scary time for parents who worry about becoming ill or caring for loved ones who have contracted the virus, as well as for the many Americans whose ability to support their families is becoming uncertain. With all of the turmoil, it's easy to forget how this is affecting our children.

Thankfully, for the most part, children seem to be spared from the most extreme and dangerous effects of the coronavirus. But they are still feeling the pain of the pandemic in a big way, from the preschooler who doesn't understand why she can't hug her grandparents or see her teachers to the teen whose big life moments like graduation and final year-end competitions have suddenly been snatched away. The toll and timeline for these impacts is unknown.

Don't skip well-child check-ups

The disruption in routine can also lead to behavior changes. For younger children, that can mean less sleep, more tantrums, and bed-wetting. For older children, it can manifest in feelings of sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness. With studies showing the mental health of U.S. teens and young adults dramatically declining over the past decade, it's important that we continue to check in with our children to talk about how they're doing and what they're experiencing.

With children and adolescents now home from child care and schools, the only person outside the household who has eyes on them may be their doctor. That is why well-child visits must continue for all children and youth, even in areas where the visit must be done through telemedicine.

Well-child visits are where we examine children, discuss concerns with families and talk to adolescents about mental health, sexuality, and high-risk behaviors like vaping and drugs. Pediatricians are trained to screen for signs of distress of all kinds during these visits, from expected stress to serious family distress and even suicidal thoughts.

Especially during such an uncertain and stressful time for children, we use these visits to check in on their mental health, too.

These exams are so important to keep kids on track, which is why we urge parents everywhere to first reach out to your child's pediatrician. Come for your scheduled appointments, in person, by phone, or on a computer. Call us when your child has an ear infection or trouble breathing, or may have broken a bone or need stitches. Call when you have a mental health concern or notice a change in your child's behavior.

Keep up with vaccines

And, perhaps most important, make sure your child continues to get vaccines on time. Despite the very real concerns of COVID-19, it's especially important for children to continue to receive the essential health services their scheduled well-visits provide. Disrupting immunization schedules, even for brief periods, can lead to outbreaks of infections like measles or whooping cough that can be even more threatening to a child's health.

Balancing the health care needs of our young patients with the need to practice physical distancing requires a watchful eye, a measured approach, and teamwork between parent and pediatrician. We will continue our work to protect all children, especially those who are most vulnerable to the impacts of coronavirus — those on Medicaid with complex health care needs and from low-income families, and children from under-resourced and minority communities, particularly African Americans, who are experiencing a disproportionate burden of illness and fatalities.

Pediatricians' message to parents is clear: We are open for business, and we are here for you and your children now more than ever. While federal and state government officials work to ensure our health care system can continue to function throughout the pandemic, we urge them to recognize and support the doctors at its epicenter.

At a moment when our nation's eyes are on the spread of the virus, our eyes are on the children.

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