The Doctor Will See You Now? On Your Phone

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How would you like to have a doctor check out that persistent cough, but without going to an urgent care facility? How about having an emergency room doctor take a look at your kid who twisted her ankle while riding her bike, but without leaving the house?

UA employees can do just that with the Doctor on Demand [1] smartphone app. Part of the University of Arizona's health benefits, the service is significantly less costly than a traditional urgent care or ER visit, and perhaps even more importantly reduces wait times to a matter of minutes instead of hours.

Doctor on Demand is available as an app for Apple and Android smartphones and tablets, and can be used on desktop computers via a website. Once users have registered with their health plan provider information, they can summon a medical doctor or mental health professional by tapping a button. The service is available 24/7 and wait times are minimal.

"It's like Uber for urgent care," says Thomas McDonald, director of strategic initiatives in the Division of Human Resources [2], who has used Doctor on Demand to get a prescription for a sinus condition and an initial evaluation when his daughter broke her ankle. "It was essentially a 15-minute doctor visit from the comfort of our home."

Once a user requests to speak with a doctor, the app will assign the case to one of the Doctor on Demand medical professionals, who will respond by establishing a video connection using the camera on the patient's device. During the video visit, a medical doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist will look, listen, examine and engage with the person seeking advice to diagnose the issue and provide a treatment plan, and if necessary, call in prescriptions. Only if a reliable diagnosis cannot be obtained through remote evaluation will Doctor on Demand refer the patient for an in-person appointment.

Of the top 20 problems that send patients to urgent care facilities or emergency rooms, 18 can be treated remotely, according to the Doctor on Demand website [3]. Those include back pain, bronchitis and pneumonia, coughs, migraine, rashes and sinus infections.

For UA benefits-eligible employees, the cost for a virtual consultation is $49 until the employee's deductible is met. The co-pay after the deductible is met is $20 for those with exclusive provider organization or preferred provider organization medical plans, and 10 percent for employees with high deductible health plans. The fees are payable with a credit card upon requesting a video visit.
"We have received great feedback from UA employees who have used Doctor on Demand," says Staci Wilson, director of research and analysis and benefits administration. "One employee felt so bad that she could not get out of bed, and she was able to get medications prescribed based on the video evaluation."

"One of the nice things is that you can schedule follow-up visits with the same person who saw you the first time," McDonald says. "The service tracks all the information from the first visit, logs it and keeps records, so people can access their health history at any point later on."

Because the service is accessible from anywhere with a robust cellular or wireless internet connection, Doctor on Demand makes for peace of mind while traveling, Wilson says.

"Rather than trying to find an urgent care in an unfamiliar city, you can get help wherever you are," she said.

There are certain emergencies that Doctor on Demand won't treat, such as chest pain, vomiting or coughing blood, loss of consciousness, multiple broken bones, severe burns and pediatric ear infections.

In addition to the convenience factor, the service cuts down on out-of-pocket costs, according to Wilson: UA employees with exclusive provider organization or preferred provider organization medical plans are charged a $75 co-pay when they visit a brick-and-mortar urgent care, and $200 when they go to the ER, after any deductible has been met. Employees with a high deductible health plan pay 10 percent of the urgent care or ER costs after their deductible is met.

The app informs users about their out-of-pocket expenses when they choose to solicit a video visit.

While anyone can use Doctor on Demand, only benefits-eligible UA employees with medical coverage through the UA have access to the discounted rates. For those without insurance, medical visits have a flat rate of $75, therapy appointments start at $79, and an initial psychiatric visit costs $229.

To sign up for Doctor on Demand, please visit the Human Resources website [1].

UA employees enrolled in the UA alternative plan through UnitedHealthcare have the option of signing up for a similar service, Designated Virtual Visit Network [4] (PDF). To sign up, please visit the UnitedHealthcare website [5].

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