

COVID-19 Safety Tips for Your Physician Practice

The COVID-19 public health emergency changed physician practices clinically, operationally and financially. Some practices closed their doors completely while others reduced office hours. Virtual healthcare became increasingly popular. Practices need to protect their patients and staff, follow regulations, prevent disease spread and rebuild revenue. Following are tips to help you during this unprecedented time, categorized by the following topics:

Create a Plan & Update Policies

Develop Cleaning Protocols

Conduct Pre-Visit Screenings

Reopen & Expand Hours

Implement a Triage Program

Limit Access to the Office

Institute Safety Measures

Offer Telehealth Services

Assign a COVID-19 Lead

Create a Plan & Update Office Policies

- ✓ Include specifics based on your scenario: temporarily closed practice, reduced office hours, offered virtual services only.
- ✓ If you temporarily closed your practice, select a reopening day, identify business hours and address what services you will offer. Decide if you will reopen incrementally and slowly increase to 100% capacity or reopen fully. Determine what staff you will need to meet these goals. Include back-up staff to cover when an employee must self-isolate at home following exposure or illness due to COVID-19.
- ✓ Ensure the reopening or expanding office hours plan protects you from liability. You must comply with laws and guidelines related to COVID-19 passed by several government agencies, such as the CDC, CMS, OSHA and HIPAA.
- ✓ Contact your malpractice carrier to inquire if additional coverage is needed.
- ✓ Ensure telehealth services are included in your insurance policy.
- ✓ Provide COVID-19 training for all office staff. Refer to the following resources:
 - [National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences Training](#)
 - [CDC Healthcare Specific Training Resources](#)
- ✓ Address the need to have a sufficient supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) available at all times. OSHA requires employers to provide PPE necessary to protect employees on the job.
 - Check your inventory, develop an ongoing reordering process and assign responsible staff.
 - If a patient with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 must be seen in the office, OSHA recommends using gloves, gowns, eye/face protection and NIOSH-certified, disposable N95 filter face piece respirators or better. Learn more: [OSHA COVID-19 FAQs](#).
- ✓ Plan must inform staff and patients of office policy changes so they know what to expect (i.e., required to wear a face mask in the office).
- ✓ Provide employee education so staff know to **not** come to work if they have a fever or any symptoms of COVID or have been in recent contact with a person who tested positive. Specify how long they must self-quarantine at home.
- ✓ Bring staff back in phases or have them work on alternate days or staggered times to reduce contact and consider allowing administrative staff who do not need to be in the office to work remotely. You will also need to provide special accommodations for staff who are in a high risk population.
- ✓ Review your business plan and financial reporting to better project revenue and expenses. Track invoices, including due date and amount to be paid, to identify if any invoices can be delayed until you return to 100% capacity.

Reopen & Expand Hours Incrementally

- ✓ Consider reopening with a lighter patient load. Scheduling fewer appointments/hour will reduce the chance that patients will come into contact with each other, provide you with an opportunity to mitigate issues as they occur and allow time to disinfect exam rooms between patients.
- ✓ Consider expanding office hours later in the day to allow you to see more patients and increase revenue.
- ✓ Clearly communicate office hours with patients during the transition. Update your telephone message, website and signs on your office door.



Institute Safety Measures

- ✓ Screen staff every morning: check temperature, assess for symptoms and inquire about possible COVID exposure. Record in a confidential employee screening log. Send employees with a fever or symptoms home immediately.
- ✓ Mandate that everyone in the office wear a face mask (staff, patients and vendors). Provide a disposable mask to anyone who doesn't have one.
- ✓ Enforce physical distancing by rearranging office and waiting room chairs to maintain six feet of distance.
- ✓ If possible, separate waiting room into two sections: one area for "well" patients and the other for "sick" patients.
- ✓ Consider placing a physical barrier (i.e., sneeze guard) at the registration and check out areas.
- ✓ Provide alcohol-based hand sanitizers that contain at least 70% alcohol in multiple locations throughout the office, including the registration and check-out areas, waiting room, exam rooms and bathroom.
- ✓ Post signs in multiple locations that promote safety guidelines: everyone must wear a face mask, wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, etc.
- ✓ If possible, limit shared devices that require facial contact, such as telephones, thermometers and headsets. If devices must be shared, disinfect **EVERY** time a different person uses it.
- ✓ Consider putting a wipeable cover on computer keyboards so they can easily be cleaned.
- ✓ Consider asking patients to wait in their car until staff is ready to see them.
- ✓ Utilize a disinfection checklist to record all environmental cleanings and ensure compliance. Include frequently-touched surfaces such as doorknobs, handrails, countertops, light switches telephones, keyboards, scales, etc. Record the date, time, area/object cleaned, product used and initials of who performed the task.
- ✓ Provide formal training and demonstrate how to put on, take off and properly dispose of PPE. Educate staff on when PPE must be used and clearly identify what PPE to wear for each circumstance.
 - Review the [CDC Guide to Using PPE](#).



Develop Cleaning Protocols

- ✓ Develop a cleaning policy that identifies supplies, what needs to be cleaned and when, who is responsible and where to document everything. Exam rooms must be cleaned in between patients. Waiting rooms, bathrooms and shared equipment should be sanitized multiple times throughout the day.
- ✓ Utilize a disinfection checklist to record all environmental cleanings and ensure compliance. Include frequently-touched surfaces such as doorknobs, handrails, countertops, light switches, telephones, keyboards, scales, etc. Record the date, time, area/object cleaned, product used and initials of who performed the task.
- ✓ Provide formal training and cleaning demonstrations to all applicable staff
- ✓ Address handling of trash by using disposable gloves and gowns.
- ✓ Follow [CDC Infection Control Guidelines](#) and the [EPA List of COVID-19 Disinfectants](#).



Implement a Triage Program

- ✓ Create a triage policy for patients who request an office visit.
- ✓ Ask the following questions to assess COVID-19 exposure or infection:

Have you, a member or visitor to your household, or any close contacts:

- 1. Been diagnosed with COVID-19, tested for COVID-19 or been told by a healthcare provider that you might have COVID-19?*
- 2. Been in close contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days?*
- 3. Experienced any of the following symptoms in the last 24 hours – fever of at least 100.3 degrees, cough, shortness of breath, other symptom?*
- 4. Traveled to a COVID-19 hot spot or high risk area in the past 14 days?*

- ✓ Direct patients with COVID-19 symptoms to a testing site, rather than being seen in the office.
 - Contact your public health department to obtain a list of COVID testing sites in your area to share with your patients.
 - Provide counseling, such as the need to self-quarantine, if testing is warranted, then submit the E/M code so you can get reimbursed for the COVID-19 counseling.



Offer Telehealth Services

- ✓ Identify patients who are good candidates for telemedicine based on medical condition and purpose of the visit, then contact them and provide education on the benefits of telemedicine, such as saving time and travel and eliminating exposure to other patients.
- ✓ Offer telehealth services, when medically appropriate, to patients who request an appointment.



Conduct Pre-Visit Screenings

- ✓ Call patients the day prior to an office appointment and screen for recent possible COVID infection or exposure.
- ✓ Sample telephone script:

Hello, may I please speak with <patient name>? I am calling from <practice name> regarding your appointment tomorrow at <time> with <clinician name>. The safety of our patients and staff is of utmost importance, given the recent coronavirus outbreak. I need to ask a few questions that will remain confidential. The information you provide will be reviewed by a member of our medical team who will provide additional guidance if adjustments need to be made to your scheduled appointment. Have you, a member or visitor to your household, or any close contacts..... (see questions in "Implement a Triage Program" section)



Limit Access to the Office

- ✓ Create and enforce a policy that limits who can enter the practice. Consider locking the door to prevent anyone from entering without your knowledge.
- ✓ Consider scheduling vendors and salespeople when patients are not in the office.
- ✓ Discourage patients from bringing family members or friends to the appointment.

Assign a COVID-19 Lead

- ✓ Assign one person in the office to be responsible for staying up-to-date with federal, state and local requirements because regulations and guidelines continue to change.



Resources:

- [AMA's COVID-19: A Physician Practice Guide to Reopening](#)
- [CDC's Guidance for Providing Healthcare During the COVID 19 Pandemic](#)
- [Federal Guidelines for Opening Up America Again](#)
- [Re-Opening America: What Patients Should Know About Seeking Healthcare](#)
- [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health \(NIOSH\)](#)
- [Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\) COVID 19 Enforcement Response](#)
- [CDC Workplace Guidance to Plan, Prepare, and Respond](#)