

GP encourages patients to continue visiting their doctor

A Buderim-based general practitioner is encouraging patients to continue making contact with their regular GP during the COVID-19 pandemic, either via telehealth appointments or even in person, in order to stay well and healthy.

Dr Jon Harper, who is also a general practice liaison officer at Central Queensland, Wide Bay, Sunshine Coast PHN, said it was particularly important for people living with, or at risk of developing, chronic illness.

“The concern with these patients missing their appointment or avoiding making one can mean a deterioration in their condition, or delayed treatment of a complication,” Dr Harper said.

“Some patients will be able to seek treatment from the comfort of their own home, but there are some things that cannot easily be managed over a phone or video call, particularly for patients with type 2 diabetes, asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, better known as COPD.

“Monitoring heart rhythm, listening to lungs in asthma and COPD patients, or dressing chronic skin ulcers are just a few of the processes which are difficult to conduct remotely, and their GP might ask those patients to visit in person.”

Approximately 16,000 people have been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes on the Sunshine Coast, and nearly 119,000 have a chronic respiratory illness such as asthma or COPD, with many more likely living with these illnesses undiagnosed.

“There are many risk factors for developing a chronic disease and some of these are more obvious than others, like smoking, consuming an excessive amount of alcohol, or having a strong family history.”

“But some risk factors are only detected by examination by a doctor and appropriate blood tests.”

As well as those living with or at risk of developing chronic illness, people with children under 18 months are also encouraged to continue with visits to their general practitioner.

“Under regular circumstances, outside of a pandemic, children under 18 months would typically see a GP quite frequently,” Dr Harper said.

“Early intervention is key for this age group if they are not developmentally on track, which means it’s particularly important for parents to make and keep their appointments.”

Dr Harper said the risk of contracting COVID-19 while visiting the doctor has been minimised by strict infection control policies.

“General practices are doing more phone consultations than ever before to reduce the number of people sitting in practice waiting rooms, which in turn reduces the risk of spread.

“Doctors and patients need to balance the risk of exposure to COVID-19, with the risk of deterioration in a patient’s condition or abilities, if the patient does not physically attend.”

Dr Harper said this year, people aged over-65 are also being encouraged to visit their GP in person, in order to get their seasonal flu vaccination.

“Australia is the first country in the world to provide what’s called an adjuvanted quadrivalent vaccine specifically made for the over-65s.

“This one vaccine contains four strains of influenza expected to circulate in the Southern Hemisphere this winter.

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“It is only available through the National Immunisation Program, making the vaccine itself free, and these vaccines are distributed to GP clinics and government-run health clinics.”

Children under 5 years are also eligible for vaccinations under the program.

While most general practices will stock the vaccine, patients should always phone ahead to ensure supply.

Similarly, a conversation with practice staff when making an appointment will help determine the type of consultation (i.e. via telehealth phone or videoconferencing, or face-to-face) most suitable to a patient’s need.

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For more information contact: Jasmin Midgley, Senior Media and Communications Officer, Central Queensland, Wide Bay, Sunshine Coast PHN on 0451 300 050.