

Preparing Health Systems for Winter Surge: The Vital Role of Virtual Care



As the fall season arrives, health systems face a predictable surge in demand for care. The combination of back-to-school illnesses, seasonal respiratory infections, and the pressures of meeting end-of-year healthcare goals intensifies the challenges for hospitals and clinics. Unpredictable weather events can disrupt services, creating further complications for both providers and patients. To address these issues and maintain the delivery of timely care, health systems must take proactive measures. Among the most effective strategies is integrating virtual care services to manage the upcoming winter surge.

Understanding the Winter Surge

Several factors drive the increase in healthcare demand during the fall and winter months. Respiratory illnesses such as the flu and the new COVID variants peak during this time as people spend more time indoors and gather for the holidays. Emergency departments also see an uptick in injuries related to winter activities, such as slips and falls, and workplace accidents. Beyond the obvious seasonal illnesses, weather events like snowstorms can delay or prevent patients from accessing care, leading to spikes in hospital admissions once the weather clears.

These predictable patterns place a strain on health systems that are already grappling with capacity and access issues. The average wait time for appointments in many specialities is already alarmingly long, with patients waiting over a month for the third-next-available appointment. This delay in care can exacerbate chronic conditions and increase the likelihood of more severe health issues down the line. Therefore, preparing for the winter surge is not just about managing immediate demand but also about preventing a worsening of health outcomes.

The Role of Virtual Care in Expanding Capacity

Implementing virtual care services is one of the most effective strategies for managing the winter surge. Virtual care can significantly expand a health system's capacity to meet patient demand by providing timely access to care for minor but urgent conditions. This is particularly useful for conditions like upper respiratory infections, uncomplicated urinary tract infections, and routine COVID-19 treatment, where patients can receive care from the comfort of their homes.

Virtual care also caters to the needs of busy families and working parents who may find it challenging to balance in-person medical appointments with their daily responsibilities. By offering a convenient and flexible alternative, virtual care reduces the strain on in-office providers, allowing them to focus on patients who require in-person attention. This shift helps optimise the time and resources of healthcare teams, ultimately leading to improved patient outcomes.

Supporting Chronic Condition Management and Annual Wellness Visits

For patients with chronic conditions, regular virtual check-ins with healthcare providers can ensure that their conditions are well-managed, medications are adjusted as needed, and any potential issues are addressed before they become severe. This not only keeps patients engaged in their care but also reduces the likelihood of emergency visits during the winter months.

Virtual care also offers a solution for Medicare patients who need to complete their Annual Wellness Visits (AWVs). With the rise of telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic, many patients have become accustomed to the convenience of virtual AWVs. These visits accurately capture care gaps and coding requirements, helping health systems meet their quality goals while providing patients with easy access to necessary care.

Preparing for Weather-Related Disruptions

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Weather events can severely impact a health system's ability to provide in-person care. Snowstorms and other severe weather conditions can lead to clinic closures and transportation challenges, preventing patients from accessing necessary services. By establishing a robust virtual care programme, health systems can pivot to virtual visits during these disruptions, ensuring continuity of care.

To maximise the effectiveness of virtual care during such events, the telehealth platform must integrate seamlessly with the health system's electronic health record (EHR). This integration ensures that virtual care providers have access to the patient's medical history, enabling coordinated and comprehensive care.

Conclusion

As health systems brace for the winter surge, integrating virtual care services is critical in maintaining access and capacity. By partnering with virtual care providers, health systems can offer timely and convenient care, reduce the strain on in-office providers, and ensure that patients receive the attention they need, no matter the challenges posed by seasonal illnesses or weather disruptions. Preparing now will not only help meet the immediate demands of the winter season but also build a more resilient healthcare system for the future.

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