



## FACTUM

### The Doctor Will See You Now, Online- Canadians Consider Benefits of Virtual Care

#### Canadians Want Relationship with their Family Doctor, But Enticed by Ease of Access of Virtual Care

**Toronto, ON, March 10, 2022 (revised)** – Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Canadians conducted various activities virtually, including shopping, chatting, and working online. Uniquely, the pandemic has opened up opportunities in Canada to seek medical care virtually, a phenomenon that was relatively rare pre-COVID. A recent study conducted on behalf of the Canadian Medical Association sought to understand Canadian’s perceptions of virtual care and specifically “walk-in” virtual care (telephone, video conference, email, text messaging), and the benefits and costs it poses when compared to traditional primary care. Specifically, the study examined Canadian perceptions on the importance of *continuity of care*, the concept that a patient would continually seek care from a single physician and/or medical team, receive a consistent approach to their health, and have a provider who understands their medical history.

#### A Relationship with a Doctor is Important for Many Canadians

The research shows that the relationship between patient and provider is a key component of medicine for Canadians. Eight in 10 (81%) agree that it is important to have an ongoing relationship with a family doctor who understands their changing needs, while 79% agree it is important to have an ongoing relationship with a family doctor who understands them as a person. In fact, when asked to indicate whether they would prioritize an ongoing relationship with a family doctor/team or access/convenience, a continuous relationship was selected by 59%, followed by 33% who give equal importance to both continuity of care and convenience.

Physician/patient relationships are prioritized by those older (73%, 55+), those born in Canada (61%), those with chronic illnesses (66%), those who have an established relationship with their family doctor (65%), and those who rate their physician relationship as excellent/very good (68%). Those aged 18-54 years old (18-34, 40%; 35-54, 38%) were more likely than other ages to indicate convenience and continuity are equally important as are those who have immigrated to Canada, especially recent immigrants (40%; immigrated <10 years ago, 46%), parents (41%), and those who rate their relationship with their doctor as good/fair/poor (good 34%; fair/poor, 44%).

Only 9% of Canadians give higher importance to access/the convenience of virtual “walk-in” clinics over an on-going relationship with a family doctor, higher among 18-54 years old (18-34, 12%; 35-54 11%), those who have immigrated <10 years age (16%), parents (12%), caregivers (12%), have no family doctor (16%), have visited urgent care/ER (11%), and whose doctor does not offer virtual services (10%).

However, opportunities for virtual walk-in care are evident in the data: roughly a third of Canadians say they are less concerned about having an ongoing relationship with one family doctor, as long as the doctors and health care providers have electronic access to their health records.



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### *Office Hours Can be a Pain Point for Many; Virtual Care is the New Normal*

While traditional medicine has the advantage of interpersonal relationships between physician and patient, it comes with the challenge of often limited business hours. Half (52%) of Canadians state they would not be able to access after-hours care if they needed medical assistance outside of going to the emergency room. After-hours care aside, 30% of Canadians are unable to easily see a doctor during regular business hours, while 43% say they waited more than four days when they made their last appointment with their family doctor.

While the term “virtual care” may be new for some, it will feel familiar for others. In fact, six in 10 Canadians are aware their family doctor offers virtual services, an increase from before the pandemic when only 12% knew their family physician offered this service. Not only is virtual care increasingly a part of the medical lexicon, but it may become a part of the “new normal” as more than half (54%) of Canadians say it is very/somewhat important to them that their family doctor offer virtual services.

### *Burgeoning Interest in Virtual “Walk-in” Care*

Despite a desire for a relationship with their family physician, the data show Canadians are interested in the idea of virtual care, including virtual walk-in clinics. When asked their likelihood to use a virtual walk-in clinic, three in ten (28%) say they would be very or somewhat likely. But are Canadians willing to trade off continuity of care for the ease of virtual medicine? The data suggests that Canadians are looking ahead and considering virtual care despite the lack of continuity of care: four in 10 (40%) agree that when it comes to minor illnesses/injuries (including prescriptions/refills, infections or colds) they would be *more likely* to use a virtual walk-in clinic instead of a family doctor. The same proportion (39%) agree they would trust a doctor in a virtual walk-in clinic in the absence of relationship continuity, while three in 10 (28%) say they are comfortable foregoing informational continuity when using a virtual walk-in clinic. One in five say they would be likely to use virtual walk-in clinics, even if they had to pay per visit.

### *Virtual “Walk-in” Care Users Feel Experience is Positive*

Just one-in-ten Canadians (11%) have already used virtual walk-in services. Among those, almost half (48%) indicate their experience was positive, although this rests below the scores provided for traditional family medicine, where 59% of Canadians had a positive overall experience. Patients who used the virtual walk-in service appreciated the customer service and how quick and easy it was to use. Those who provided negative comments spoke of long wait times and how it didn’t meet their needs. When considering what method of virtual care they’re interested in, Canadians show a preference for a phone call (91%), a video conference call (59%), an email (34%), or a text message (17%). While approximately half (55%) of doctors currently offer a phone call option, fewer provide video conferencing (14%), email (9%), or text messaging (4%) options, pointing to potential opportunities for doctor-patient interactions in the future.



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### *Virtual “Walk-in” Care Services can Potentially Alleviate the Burden on the Healthcare System*

Nearly half (46%) of Canadians have accessed at least one type of urgent care for non-life-threatening illnesses or injuries in the past year:

- 33% of those went to a walk-in clinic
- 20% went to urgent care
- 26% went to the emergency room

The data suggests that given the high utilization of urgent care for non-threatening illnesses or injuries, and the corresponding need for greater access to the healthcare system after business hours, expanded virtual care services (both primary and episodic), may help to improve access and to alleviate the burden of the healthcare system.

#### Correction note:

The previous version indicated: *36% of Canadians have already used virtual walk-in services. This has been corrected to: Just one-in-ten Canadians (11%) have already used virtual walk-in services. (March 10, 2022).*

### About the Study

These are some of the findings of an Ipsos poll conducted between September 14-23, 2021, on behalf of the Canadian Medical Association. For this survey, a sample of 2,000 Canadians aged 18+ was interviewed online. Quotas and weighting were employed to ensure that the sample's composition reflects that of the Canadian population according to census parameters. The precision of Ipsos online polls is measured using a credibility interval. In this case, the poll is accurate to within  $\pm 2.5$  percentage points, 19 times out of 20, had all Canadians aged 18+ been polled. The credibility interval will be wider among subsets of the population. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to other sources of error, including, but not limited to coverage error, and measurement error.

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