

# THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

## The Future of Digital Healthcare

*An engaged, empowered and improved patient experience is here to stay*

Despite the pain and suffering that the pandemic has wrought, there have been a few silver linings. Among them, a shift to virtual healthcare saw patients move away from in-person visits to hospitals and doctors' offices in favour of phone calls and online meetings with healthcare teams. Beyond contributing to patient and healthcare worker safety during the pandemic, the change to virtual care appears to be supporting other lasting and positive outcomes, too.

A recent survey conducted by Angus Reid<sup>1</sup> found that 51 per cent of Canadians have increased their use of virtual healthcare since the start of the pandemic. The majority of these Canadians intend to continue to use virtual care after the pandemic is over and safety precautions have been lifted.

### Virtual health care means more access

The rise in virtual care gives Canadians an added avenue to receive healthcare services, improving accessibility to healthcare. Online options can also help people feel more engaged and empowered in their health decisions by choosing what works best for them and receiving care and counsel from the privacy of their own homes. It's also helpful for those who have mobility and/or transportation issues or those in remote locations.

Improved accessibility will be particularly important moving forward as the pandemic has caused a severe backlog in diagnoses and treatment. [A CTV news report](#) indicated that more than 350,000 surgeries, procedures and specialist consultations were postponed across Canada in the first few months of the pandemic. This disruption in care will likely be felt for years to come.

### Turning the corner on delayed diagnoses and treatments

According to Express Scripts Canada data, 2020 saw a significant drop in new claimants for chronic diseases including diabetes, depression and cancer. From the end of March to December, depression and cancer saw a two per cent decline in weekly new claimants while diabetes saw a one per cent decline. The result was more than 130,000 Canadians may not have started treatments last year.

The latest Express Scripts Canada Drug Trend data, however, indicates that in the first 10 months of 2021 the potential backlog of patient visits with their doctors decreased by 47%, from 130,000 to 69,500.

Notably, patient backlogs for diabetes, depression and cancer – three of Canada's most prevalent serious health conditions – are in decline as follows: diabetes (72.5%), depression (45%) and cancer (10%). While this trend is encouraging and shows that

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.accesswire.com/648188/Half-of-Canadians-have-increased-use-of-virtual-healthcare-during-the-pandemic-Canadian-survey>



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telehealth is paying dividends, of nagging concern, a disproportionate percentage of the remaining backlog is attributable to women, specifically in terms of cancer (69%) and depression (67%).

### The evolving roles of pharmacies

Beyond the advent of virtual care, pharmacies continue to play an important role in Canada's health care system. This was most recently illustrated in the involvement of pharmacies in the delivery of COVID-19 vaccinations across the nation.

For our part, Express Scripts Canada Pharmacy continues to play a transformational role in the Canadian pharmacy landscape. From providing ESC Pharmacy patients with access to virtual care 24/7, including automatic refills and reminders, phone consultations about medications, to the delivery of up to 90-day supplies of prescription drugs directly to our patient's door, our mission is to be progressive contributor to Canada's virtual health care system.

Serving as patient advocates, ESC pharmacists are driven by a focus on personalized care, innovation and continuous improvement intent on enhancing services, convenience and better health outcomes.

