

Coronavirus pre-screenings: The webcam doctor will see you now

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Telemedicine finally came of age this week.

As Disneyland said it would close, Broadway went dark, so many

conferences were canceled (E3, Apple's WWDC, NAB and others) and Tom Hanks announced he had tested positive for the coronavirus, many people had the same questions.

Am I infected too? How do I find out?

At a press conference Friday, President Donald Trump urged people to turn to telemedicine, which I did as well this week after developing a mild sore throat.

Because, as I discovered, despite the many claims of testing becoming more widespread, the cold reality is that, as of today, the local doctor office is unlikely to see you. I was directed to get my questions answered by the Los Angeles County of Health, where the recording told me there were 30 people ahead of me on hold.

But the telemedicine folks are more than happy to take a look, via webcam, and figure out if you're actually at risk or not.

Does it replace actual testing? No. But it's a start, as you can actually get an answer from somebody, without having to wait for an appointment, or worse, visit an office that might be filled with people who are infected, or you will infect.

Can they actually tell if you're positive? Probably not. But they can see some of the symptoms, just by staring through the webcam. And that's a start.

Dr. Christina Johns, senior medical advisor for PM Pediatrics, a Lake Success, New York-based urgent care provider that offers telemedicine services, says she can look at somebody and detect sneezing, coughing and respiratory symptoms. "Without putting a stethoscope to their chest, I can tell if they're in respiratory duress," she says. "Can they finish a

complete sentence in one breath?"

What she hasn't done, nor have the folks at Doctor on Demand, the telemedicine firm founded by TV's Dr. Phil McGraw and his son Jay, is diagnose someone as testing positive for the virus.

What they are doing is screening out the worried folks who watch the news and fear the worst and refer the ones with symptoms that might actually be within the scope of the virus to the local health departments.

"Our platform is better suited to deal with this overflow," says Dr. Ian Tong, the chief medical officer for Doctor on Demand. "It's difficult for any one practice to deal with this, we have capacity to handle it."

I sought Doctor on Demand's help when I worried about the virus, paying \$75 for a 15-minute session. I was promised a five- to 10-minute wait period, but it (understandably) stretched to 30 minutes before I was connected to Dr. Susan Mayo of Los Angeles.

She had me put my mouth basically right up to the webcam and say "Aah" and she said from that, she could tell that I wasn't swollen and wasn't seeing signs of the virus.

Tong said call volume has spiked 20% in the last weeks since the coronavirus began to spread, and he expects it to spike even more, before dying down in April.

In a week in which there was so much confusion about the [coronavirus](#), where the only stated remedy beyond washing hands was to lock yourself up at home and stay away from people, at least telemedicine gave us somebody to talk to and try and get some answers from.

But Dr. Michael Klein, a Boston-area physician worries that

telemedicine will become so popular, people will stop coming in for their in-person visits.

People will likely prefer webcam visits "because it's a lot easier to not have to take time out of the day to come see me," he says. "But in person, I get nuance from how they dress, how they interact with the staff and a lot of information from a physical exam, that you just can't get from a webcam."

In the short term, the telemedicine pre-screenings help take the load off local doctors, he says. There's no question the virus scares "jump-started" [telemedicine](#) this week. "I just hope people don't get too used to it."

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