



Top Five Reasons

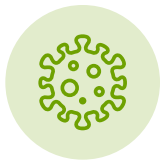
People Call the Nurse Advice Line

In over 20 years of managing the Health Dialog 24-hour Nurse Advice Line, we found that people call for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, they want to confirm if their symptoms warrant being seen by a doctor or if an emergency department visit is more appropriate. Many times, however, they are looking for information on their medications, diagnosis, lab results or treatment options as they relate to a specific condition or symptom.

To learn more, we analyzed the calls to our Nurse Advice Line between April 2021 and March 2022, and here are the top five reasons:



**Abdominal
Pain**



COVID-19



**Respiratory
Problems**



**Urinary
Problems**



**Fever or
Chills**

In this e-book, we will review the reasons and the types of questions our 24-hour Nurse Advice Line often receives. By addressing these questions, we help ensure your members seek an appropriate and cost-effective level of care, take advantage of any plan resources, and better understand and adhere to their treatment plan. Acting as a part of your plan's care team, our Nurse Advice Line can also increase member satisfaction by providing support and guidance, even after hours. This, in turn, can help improve Star Ratings for Medicare plans.



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1 Abdominal Pain

Abdominal pain is common and includes a variety of symptoms like cramping, vomiting, diarrhea, gas, bloating and blood in the stool. From wondering, “was it something I ate,” to “could I need my appendix out,” or “do I have a chronic condition like irritable bowel disease,” abdominal pain covers a broad range of medical causes and raises a lot of questions and worry and often prompt people to visit their doctor. This is also why it is the most common reason people call the Health Dialog Nurse Advice line.

In a 2021 study published by the American Gastroenterological Association, nearly 25,000 responded to a questionnaire and 10,300 of them reported experiencing abdominal pain. Of these, 81.0% were symptomatic in the past week of which 61.5% sought medical care for their symptoms.¹

Determining the cause of abdominal pain starts with understanding the severity of the pain, its location and other symptoms.

- Generalized pain occurs in at least half of the belly. This type of pain is often not serious and can occur with illnesses such as indigestion or constipation. The pain can often go away without medical treatment or with the help of over-the-counter medications to provide relief. However, if generalized pain gets worse, it could be a symptom of a more serious condition such as an intestinal blockage.
- Localized pain is usually a sign of a more serious condition. This pain appears in a smaller, more specific area of the belly. This can occur with conditions such as appendicitis, gallbladder disease or peptic ulcer disease.
- Cramping is a squeezing type of pain that comes and goes and can change in intensity and location. Cramping is rarely serious and can be felt all over the belly or in one area. This pain is often caused by gas or constipation and is rarely serious.



Abdominal pain could be serious and medical treatment should be sought if the pain:

- Gets worse
- Moves from a general “all over” pain to a more “localized spot”
- Continues over a period of time



Helping a Member to a Healthy Recovery

A member called the Nurse Advice Line with abdominal pain that had been steadily increasing. According to her medical history, the member had a hernia, but her diet and home treatments were no longer managing her pain. Based on the abdominal pain symptom assessment, the Health Coach recommended that a healthcare provider evaluate the member within the next hour. The member went to the emergency department and, on a follow-up call, reported that she was in the hospital awaiting surgery to repair the hernia. Left untreated, her symptoms could have escalated and caused serious health complications. The member appreciated the guidance from her Health Coach and said she would call back as needed to ensure a healthy recovery.

¹ Lakhoo K, Almario CV, Khalil C, Spiegel BMR. Prevalence and Characteristics of Abdominal Pain in the United States. *Clin Gastroenterol Hepatol*. 2021 Sep;19(9):1864-1872.e5. doi: 10.1016/j.cgh.2020.06.065. Epub 2020 Jul 3. PMID: 32629129; PMCID: PMC7779743. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32629129/>



② COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented time, so it's no wonder our analysis found it to be the second most common reason people called Health Dialog's Nurse Advice Line. With all the uncertainty, continually changing regulations and guidelines, and varied symptoms, people often didn't know what to do and needed medical advice without having to leave their homes and risk exposure to themselves or others.

COVID is part of a larger group of viruses known as coronavirus, which includes things like the common cold and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), but this was a new type that had not been seen before. While we've made progress in understanding the virus and have developed vaccines and treatments, people still have an array of questions:

- ❓ What do I do if I've been exposed, but don't have symptoms?
- ❓ What do I do if I've been exposed, but am vaccinated?
- ❓ What do I do if I've been exposed, but I've had COVID?
- ❓ My symptoms are mild, but should I seek treatment so it doesn't get worse?
- ❓ How do I know if my symptoms are COVID?

Symptoms are often similar to the cold and flu and can be hard to tell apart. While for many, symptoms are mild or even non-existent, for some, it can be severe, leading to hospitalization or even death. Still others have long-term health complications. A 24/7 nurse advice line can help people know how to proceed, no matter the degree of symptoms. By getting answers to questions any time, day or night, without leaving home, it can limit the spread to other people, control absenteeism and reduce healthcare costs.

Helping a Member Get COVID Care

A 35-year-old member called our Nurse Advice Line and explained that they were experiencing severe chest pain and fatigue and were concerned that it could be COVID. The Health Coach reviewed the member's past medical history and specific

symptoms and determined that the member should seek medical care within the next hour. The Health Coach also helped the member find a facility nearby that was covered by insurance.

On a follow-up call, the member said that they went to the emergency department and was diagnosed with COVID. Thankfully, a chest x-ray was found to be clear and the member's oxygen saturations were within normal limits. The member was told to go home and monitor oxygen saturations and watch for consistent or worsening chest pains. The Health Coach reviewed home treatments, as well as what symptoms to monitor for that would warrant a need for additional care and explained that the member could follow up with the Nurse Advice Line anytime.

With the potential for severe cases of COVID leading to hospitalization, it was important for this member, who was experiencing chest pain, to be seen right away to prevent additional health complications and costs. Having the Nurse Advice Line gave this member peace of mind and direction during a difficult time.





3 Respiratory Problems

While there are a range of respiratory problems, from a common cold to chronic conditions, like asthma, people often don't know if they need to seek medical care or wonder if a prescription could help alleviate their symptoms.

Most often, respiratory problems are viral infections that affect the upper respiratory system (nose, mouth, sinuses and throat), such as colds, influenza and croup in children. Symptoms come on quickly and usually last for a couple of days. The cold and flu can really run you down and people often want a medication to provide a quick fix; however, antibiotics cannot be used to treat viral infections. Use of these medications when they're not needed adds the risk of unnecessary allergic reactions, side effects, and development of a resistance to future, needed antibiotic treatments.

However, not properly treating a viral infection can lead to development of a less common bacterial infection. Bacterial infections include sinus infections in the upper respiratory system or pneumonia in the lower respiratory system (bronchial tubes and lungs). Antibiotics should be used to treat bacterial infections.

Chronic lung conditions, such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) can be more susceptible to bacterial infections. These chronic conditions cause inflammation and narrowing of the bronchial tubes that carry air to the lungs. It is important to take regular medication to keep the condition under control and have rescue medications to help with exacerbations. Allergies are another condition that can cause respiratory problems that can be treated with antihistamines.

Help from the Nurse Advice Line is Nothing to Sneeze At

Since viral infections are the most common respiratory problem, which cannot be treated with antibiotics, they should be treated at home with over-the-counter medications. Our Health Coaches are registered nurses who can assess a caller's symptoms and make recommendations on treatment options to help ease symptoms and prevent unnecessary doctor's visits or escalation to a bacterial infection. Similarly, Health Coaches can help determine if the symptoms are allergy induced and antihistamines are a better course of action or if it is in fact a bacterial infection that requires antibiotics.

Helping a Member with Asthma Breathe Easier

A 26-year-old member called the Health Dialog Nurse Advice Line because she was experiencing a flair up with her asthma



and neither her maintenance nor her emergency medication were providing relief. She reported that she was having moderate difficulty breathing and her normal treatment for such exacerbations was not working, with her breathing slowly getting worse. She also explained that she had an appointment scheduled with her provider in two weeks. The member wanted to know if she could wait two weeks to see her doctor at the pre-scheduled appointment or if she needed to seek more immediate care. After reviewing her symptoms, the Health Coach recommended the member call her doctor within the next hour, as not addressing the issue could lead to an acute exacerbation and the member would have to go to the emergency department.

On a follow-up call, the member stated that she was given prednisone to use in conjunction with her maintenance and rescue inhalers to open her airways. The Health Coach reviewed the potential side effects of the prednisone, what other symptoms to monitor for and when to follow up with her provider. With the advice from her Health Coach, the member was able to get the help she needed to breathe easier.



4 Urinary Problems

Urinary problems cause a range of symptoms, such as frequent urination, pain, discoloration or strong odors, and the cause can range from something easily treated at home to a sign of more serious illness or injury. Young children can't always explain the problems they are experiencing, and older children or adults may be embarrassed and not want to talk about their symptoms.

Urine can change in color or odor from certain foods or medicines that we ingest, such as blackberries, beets, rhubarb, asparagus, Vitamin B or antibiotics, like penicillin. In these cases, there is no need for medical attention. However, darker colored urine could be from dehydration and a sweet, fruity odor could be a sign of uncontrolled diabetes.

Urinary tract infections (UTIs) are the most common urinary related issue. This includes both bladder and kidney infections, which are part of the urinary tract. UTIs can occur in babies through adults and are most

common in females, with an estimated 50% of women experiencing a bladder infection in their lifetime. A UTI occurs from bacteria in the bladder or kidneys. Kidney infections are less frequent, but more serious than bladder infections. Other types of UTIs include prostatitis and epididymitis, which are infections in men, and urethritis, a sexually transmitted infection.

Symptoms of a UTI are a burning feeling when urinating, frequent or urgent needs to urinate without passing much urine, feeling like you can't completely empty your bladder, pain in the flank (below the rib cage and above the waist on one or both sides of the back), fever, blood in the urine, strong or bad smelling urine, leaking urine, or nausea and vomiting. If you only have one symptom or if your symptoms are not severe, it can be harder to figure out the problem and other issues can have similar symptoms, such as dehydration. Additionally, children have small bladders and may urinate more frequently, particularly when drinking a lot of fluids.

Kidney stones are another common urinary problem that can cause mild to severe pain and may or may not require medical intervention to pass. They are more common in men aged 20 to 30 years old, but anyone can get kidney stones at any age. As people age, there are other urinary problems that can occur, such as incontinence or trouble urinating due to an enlarged prostate. Additionally, an injury, such as getting hit in the back or genital area, can cause trouble urinating or blood in the urine, and should be checked by a doctor.

Nurse Advice Line Discreetly Assesses Urinary Problems

As mentioned, urinary problems can be embarrassing, particularly because they can be related to sexual activity. Members might not want to see a doctor if it turns out the issue is just something they ate or a lack of fluids, yet it is important to seek care for all UTIs, as antibiotics are needed to clear the infection. If timely treatment is not sought, the infection can progress to something more serious, potentially leading to a hospital stay, particularly in older adults. Our Nurse Advice Line offers a discreet way for members to get their symptoms assessed and determine the appropriate level of care. Our Health Coaches also provide guidance on making the person more comfortable and what signs to look for if the problem is not resolving and needs additional treatment.

Helping a Members Get the Right Care at the Right Time

Following are two real-life examples of calls to our Nurse Advice Line about UTIs, one where the member needed to seek immediate attention and one where the member could be treated at home.

Member Needs Immediate Care

A 50-year-old female called the Nurse Advice Line reporting blood in her urine, difficulty urinating and severe flank pain. The Health Coach reviewed her symptoms and recommended that the member seek care within the next hour, as it could develop into a more severe kidney infection or even sepsis if not treated immediately. Older women are more likely to develop more severe infections from UTIs that require hospitalization if not treated immediately. Since it was late in the evening, the member went to the emergency department and was diagnosed with a UTI. She was able to get treatment immediately to prevent the infection from worsening. On a follow-up call, the Health Coach reviewed information on the antibiotic and possible side effects, as well as symptoms to monitor for that would indicate a follow up is needed with the member's provider. In this case, the caller was able to get the treatment she needed, and a potential costly hospital stay was avoided.

Treating Member at Home

A 31-year-old female member called the Nurse Advice Line reporting that she had been diagnosed with a UTI the day before and started on antibiotics, but was not feeling any better, was running a low-grade fever, vomiting, feeling weak and experiencing flank pain. The Health Coach reviewed the side effects of the antibiotics and how to manage them at home, as well as symptoms to monitor for that would indicate the infection was progressing and the member would need to call her doctor. On a follow-up call the next day, the member reported that the medication was working, and she was feeling better. With the help of her Health Coach, the member was able to treat her condition at home, as she wanted, without additional healthcare visits.



5 Fever or Chills

A fever is the body's normal and healthy reaction to infection and other illness. However, people often wonder if it's too high or has lasted too long and if they should seek additional medical care for themselves or a loved one.

While it can be scary, particularly with a young child, a fever is normally a sign of a minor illness and is the body's way of fighting off an infection. The cause of fevers is normally either a viral infection, such as a cold, flu or chicken pox, or it can be a bacterial infection, such as a urinary tract infection or pneumonia. Teething or immunizations can also cause a fever in children. The body temperature can also vary throughout the day or with activity, and children tend to run higher fevers than adults.

A fever is a symptom of a disease or illness, so it is important to look at the other symptoms to know if there's cause for additional medical care. The degree of the fever does not necessarily correlate with the seriousness of the illness. Sometimes minor illnesses, such as colds, can lead to high temperatures, while more serious illnesses only present a mild fever. A low body temperature on the other hand, if coupled with chills, shaking, breathing problems or confusion, can be a sign of more serious illness. Low body temperature may also be a symptom of infection, particularly in newborns, older adults or people who are frail, and can be caused from more serious infections, such as sepsis.

Nurse Advice Line Helps Members Fight Fever

Our Health Coaches are trained to assess all the caller's symptoms to be able to make recommendations for whether the fever and related illness can be managed at home or should be evaluated by a doctor or in a more urgent healthcare setting. Babies younger than three months of age should be seen by a doctor anytime they have a fever, as they can quickly become extremely sick. Additionally, if a person has traveled outside the country and gets a fever, they should be seen by a doctor to check for exposure to other diseases. Frequent or recurrent fevers can also be a sign of a serious health problem and should be evaluated by a doctor. However, in most cases, the underlying illness that caused the fever will clear up in a few days and can be treated at home.

Our Health Coaches provide guidance on how to manage the fever, making the person more comfortable and ensuring they're getting enough food, fluids and are continuing to urinate appropriately. They also provide information on what to look for as signs that the illness is escalating and additional treatment should be sought.

Getting a Member with a Fever the Help She Needed

The daughter of a 73-year-old woman called our Nurse Advice Line when her mother had a fever and chills. She was concerned, as her mother had hip replacement surgery a week earlier and when she had the other hip replaced the previous year, she became septic. The Health Coach reviewed the symptoms the caller's mother was experiencing and her past medical history. Based on the information, the Health Coach recommended they call the facility where the surgery was completed and take the member to the emergency department (ED) at that hospital.

On a follow-up call, the member reported that she went to the ED and was diagnosed with a urinary tract infection and diverticulitis, an infection or inflammation in pouches in the digestive tract that can lead to hospitalization or surgery if severe. The member was given antibiotics to treat the infections and was feeling better.

In this case, given the callers age and previous bout with sepsis, it was important that she seek medical care to ensure her condition did not worsen and require hospitalization. This fever could not have been treated at home, as antibiotics were needed to clear the infections. The Health Coach reviewed what the member should monitor while she recovered from her conditions and the appropriate usage of the medication to ensure recovery.





The Guidance Members Need

When your members have questions on abdominal pain, COVID, respiratory problems, urinary issues, a fever or another condition or symptom, remind them to call Health Dialog's 24/7 Nurse Advice Line. Our nurses provide the guidance members need to treat their symptoms, make informed choices, get the appropriate level of care and reduce unnecessary healthcare costs.

To learn more ways to improve your members' health and wellness with our full suite of population health management solutions, visit healthdialog.com