

## Health care isn't just at the doctor's office

You visit a health care provider for a minor ailment, and you leave with a plan to get better. It could be medication or changing habits, combined with follow-up appointments.

But the issues in the background don't go away. You might say to yourself:

- I don't have a car or childcare. How am I going to get back for the important follow-up?
- A gas station is the only place around me to get food. I can't go for walks because it's unsafe. How am I going to start living healthier?
- I can't afford a new mattress. What will stop my back from hurting in the morning?

These outside, non-medical factors are called social determinants of health. Health care providers everywhere are trained to ask people about them and link them with resources.

[Lucas Edwards](#), PA, is a primary care provider at OSF HealthCare in [Godfrey, Illinois](#). He sees social determinants of health come into play frequently.

"[Some] patients don't have a car or someone they can depend on for consistent rides," Edwards says. "They might have something that's going on that's medically urgent, and they can't get to where they need to go. And so they put things off until it gets to the point where things get a little bit out of control."

In those cases, people usually end up in the emergency department – nobody's idea of a pleasant day and a more costly way to receive care.

To keep social determinants of health in mind, Edwards says to speak up when you make first contact with your provider's office – whether that's on the phone, checking in on a tablet at the front desk or with a medical assistant in an exam room. Tell the person about your circumstances and be willing to answer when asked about the same.

The provider will see you for what brought you there, of course. But they might also direct you to programs within the health system or in the community to help. For example:

- An upcoming visit may be [changed to virtual](#), an option that became more common during the pandemic.
- You might be able to get care at a reduced cost.
- You could be referred to a social worker.

Edwards also says a simple conversation may enlighten.

"Some patients may not have had the same access to education. They don't understand that they have this wound on their leg, and if they don't keep it clean, it can get worse," Edwards says.

"The provider and the patient need to be on the same wavelength. They need to understand why I want them to do something," Edwards adds.

There's one last player in the social determinants of health world: the people responsible for a community's infrastructure and other daily things we often take for granted.

For example, your doctor can treat an infection. But if you go home and drink the same contaminated water, you're back to square one.

Or, things cost more at the grocery store than they used to.

"We work with patients who have financial constraints. They have a fixed income, and they can only spend X amount on some object," Edwards explains. "You need to go to the grocery store and get your bare necessities. So a lot of times, their health care dollars they have budgeted get dwindled."

"It takes a village," to keep everyone healthy, Edwards adds.

OSF HealthCare is proactive on social determinants of health. An ongoing effort aims to have people coming to medical offices fill out a [social determinants of health screen](#) at least once a year, either through their online patient portal or on a tablet at the office. Among patients screened so far, around two-thirds identified a social need.

Learn more about social determinants of health on the [World Health Organization website](#).