

**Trend in online consultation during COVID-19 Pandemic among ENT surgeons of India**

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**Abstract**

**Background:** COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in shift in consultation practices leading to a higher number of online consultations. This is primarily due to lockdowns and additional number of people preferring to stay indoors and seek medical care for non-emergency consultation.

**Aims and objectives:** To understand the shift in consultation practices amongst ENT consultants in India.

To study the common presentation complaints during online consultations.

**Materials and methods:** A questionnaire-based study was carried out comprising questions pertaining to online consultation practices amongst ENT surgeons. The questionnaire was circulated through various forums and a total of 50 participants took part in the survey. The data collected included consultation practices, common presentation complaints, total number of free consultations, etc.

**Results:** Almost all the ENT surgeons (96%) had a shift from conventional face to face consultation to online mode. Common presenting complaints included (50%) sore throat, running nose (20%), ear pain (16%).

A majority of ENT consultants conducted more than 2 free consultations per day. The ratio of face-to-face consultations vs online consultation, when compared pre-pandemic to pandemic time was 9.25:1 to 5.7:2.3.

**Conclusion:** There is trend in shifting to online consultations since the time of pandemic for non-emergency cases to department of otorhinolaryngology.

**Keywords:** Otorhinolaryngology, Online consultation

**Introduction**

Telemedicine consultation is increasingly becoming common during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Though these did not allow complete medical care but, in a difficult time like the global pandemic, can be well accepted by patients. It can maintain continuity of medical care while reducing risk of COVID-19 infection by avoiding direct contact between patients and healthcare professionals [1]. In addition to preventing risk of infection, online consultations can be cost-effective for the patients as well [2]. Hussaini et al. [3] recently reported that telemedicine may be useful as triage of otolaryngologic consults, which may minimize infectious spread and protect clinicians while preserving high-quality patient care.

In the current study we evaluated the shift in consultation practices amongst ENT consultants in India.

**Materials and methods**

A questionnaire-based study was carried out comprising questions pertaining to online consultation practices amongst ENT surgeons. The questionnaire was circulated through various forums and a total of 50 participants took part in the survey. Incomplete answers were excluded from analysis. To maintain privacy the name, place of practice of consultants was not asked in the questionnaire. The participation of ENT consultants was voluntary in nature. The data collected included baseline information such as age, gender distribution, consultation practices, common presentation complaints, total number of free consultations, etc. The data received was analysed and presented in form of tables and graphs.

**Results**

Table 1: Baseline characteristics

Median age of consultants	43 years
Minimum age	32 years
Maximum age	64 years
Males	31
Females	19
Urban centres	43
Rural centres	7

Table 2: Consultations doing online consultations

Online consultations	Yes	No
Pre-Pandemic	23 (46%)	27 (54%)
Pandemic consultations	48 (96%)	2 (4%)

Table 3: Presenting complaints

Common presenting complaints	Percentage
Sore throat	47%

Running nose	23%
Ear pain	19%
Difficulty in swallowing	6%
Nasal block	4%
Others	1%

Table 4: Free consultations

Free consultations/ day	Number
None	Zero (0%)
1 to 2	15 (30%)
3 to 5	33 (66%)
More than 5	2 (4%)

Table 5: Face to Face consultations vs online consultations

	Pre-pandemic	Pandemic
Face to Face consultations vs online consultations	9.25:1	5.7:2.3
P value	P<0.001	
Inference	Significantly higher number of online consultations during pandemic	

**Discussion**

Almost all the ENT surgeons (96%) had a shift from conventional face to face consultation to online mode. Common presenting complaints included (50%) sore throat, running nose (20%), ear pain (16%). A majority of ENT consultants conducted more than 2 free consultations per day. The ratio of face-to-face consultations vs online consultation, when compared pre-pandemic to pandemic time was 9.25:1 to 5.7:2.3. Pollock K et al. noted that the implementation of telemedicine, or virtual, services, will help the ENT surgeons provide needed care to patients while mitigating the clinical and financial impact of the pandemic [4]. The shift to online consultations is in

concordance to other studies which acknowledged such change across various medical and surgical Specialities [5-7]. As observed from our study a lot of ENT surgeons gave multiple free consultations. This can bridge a gap from those with low socio-economic background and those significantly impacted financially from the pandemic and can also provide services to remote locations especially rural areas [8]. Virtual consultations might also empower individuals thereby improving engagement with service providers [9]. These factors can be especially useful in India where a significant number of patients lack health care access and specialist care services are usually concentrated in urban areas [10].

Limitations of our study included a small sample size that cannot be extrapolated to regional and national trends. In addition our study did not measure the actual impact of online consultations on patient health.

### Conclusion

Based on findings of our questionnaire-based study:

- 1) There is a significant shift in number of ENT surgeons practicing online during the pandemic.
- 2) The majority of the consultants had more than 2 free consultations per day.
- 3) ENT care can be improved in remote areas through online consultations where specialist care is unavailable.
- 4) Post-Covid-19 pandemic there might be further change in consultation practices with a higher number of patients preferring online consultations.

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