Due to known limitations of Telemedicine, assessing Abdominal Pain is challenging. There are some essential steps we can take to provide the best assessment. Identifying which patients need urgent evaluation versus prompt follow up is a critical part of this process.

Taking a Detailed History is the first step. Writing “Abdominal pain” in the subjective/chief complaint without mention of other relevant factors such as location, severity or associated symptoms is not sufficient. There is no way to narrow down the differential without knowing this history. Documenting this becomes extremely helpful when patients call back for re-evaluation.

Identify Important Risk Factors: History of Abdominal Surgery, Alcohol/NSAID use, Recent Antibiotic use, patient on chronic Steroids / Immunosuppressive medications. These patients can be at risk for complications and may require in person evaluation depending on the clinical scenario.

Keep a High Index of Suspicion For: Appendicitis, Cholecystitis, Pancreatitis, Diverticulitis, C. diff Colitis. In Female patients with Pelvic Pain: PID, Ovarian Torsion and Ectopic Pregnancy. Patients MUST have referral for these conditions due to acuity and risk of complications.

In the Physician Quick Reference Tool, under Intra-abdominal infections there is a list of conditions which require referral. Even in cases where it is a recurring condition such as diverticulitis and the patient states “I just need antibiotics”, it’s still in the best interest of the patient to be seen BEFORE starting treatment. Starting empiric treatment is a violation of Teladoc policy.

Discuss and document reasoning behind a treatment plan. Review risk/benefits when starting new medications. Explaining the expected response to treatment and potential “Red Flags” is an important part of the discussion, so patients know when it is time to seek higher level of care.

Teladoc’s Clinical Guidelines for Gastrointestinal Symptoms has a list of indications for Prompt follow up with a PCP and when Urgent or Emergent Care should be considered. Please take the time to review this excellent resource.

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