

Hearing Amazon's footsteps, Walgreens unveils new digital platform to connect patients to doctors

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Walgreens has unveiled a new digital platform to connect customers to medical services, just weeks after its stock dove on news that Amazon is expanding into the pharmacy business.

Deerfield, Ill.-based Walgreens' new Find Care Now platform, available online and on the [pharmacy](#) chain's app, allows patients to schedule appointments at its in-store Advocate clinics, talk with doctors and therapists through telehealth company MDLIVE, and schedule online dermatology appointments through online dermatology service DermatologistOnCall. Patients can also get second opinions through the NewYork-Presbyterian [health care](#) system and make eye and hearing appointments at Walgreens stores. In other parts of the country, Walgreens has partnered with a number of other regional [health](#) care providers.

The platform lists prices for the services, before insurance, and it lists the nearest locations and wait times.

"It only makes sense for us to make it even easier for consumers to access different health care services that we or our partners provide, and to do that based on where they are, based on their health conditions," said Giovanni Monti, Walgreens Boots Alliance vice president and director of health care innovation.

When asked whether the offering is related to Amazon's push into the pharmacy business, Monti said, "We're very, very focused on our product development and strategy and we're, of course, very aware of what's happening in the market, but we do what we believe is right for our customers and augments or accelerates our strategy."

The platform has been in development for "some time," said spokesman Jim Cohn.

Walgreens lost about \$6 billion in value in one day, last month, when Amazon announced it was acquiring PillPack, an online pharmacy headquartered in Massachusetts. Shares of CVS Health and Rite Aid fell as well that day. The drop came despite fiscal third-quarter earnings for Walgreens that beat expectations.

On an earnings call that same day, Walgreens executives expressed confidence in their strategy, with Walgreens Boots Alliance CEO Stefano Pessina saying physical pharmacies will continue to be "very, very important in the future."

PillPack serves patients who take multiple medications, sorting those medications into individual packets and then mailing them to patients. The company also coordinates refills and renewals. PillPack is already in-network with many major pharmacy benefit managers and is also in-network with most Medicare Part D plans, according to its website.

Investors and industry watchers had been keeping an eye on Amazon's potential entry into the pharmacy space for some time ⁷ though a number of analysts have said that the market's sharp response to the PillPack news last month was an overreaction.

"At least for the foreseeable future, there's going to be a role for the local pharmacies, because, after all, this is a relationship business," said

John Boylan, a senior equity analyst for Edward Jones.

He expects Walgreens will continue to forge partnerships with others in the health care industry and continue expanding its in-store services. He said the new platform is yet another way for Walgreens to connect with consumers.

"It's still too early to figure out what Amazon's ultimate move is ... but anything that can bring a customer to a site or a store is a good thing, regardless of what happens," Boylan said.

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