

Telemedicine—Getting Care to Patients Closer to Home

Telemedicine allows healthcare providers to assist their patients without being physically present. It allows for assessment, diagnosis and treatment of conditions remotely. Virtual care includes telemedicine and encompasses other ways of communication with the patient to allow check-ins and monitoring. Telemedicine does not replace the need for all medical visits. If you are injured or have a serious medical problem, you should call the doctor's office or the hospital to determine if you need to be seen right away. Virtual visits may be used for non-urgent healthcare needs. They are becoming more commonly available and their cost is being covered more often by insurance companies.



There are two ways a virtual visit can take place. With the first one, the patient stays at home and connects to their provider's office at the time of the appointment via their personal device. With the second one, the patient goes to a local clinic, which is set up to be able to communicate with your provider's office. In this model, your provider can get more information, such as your vital signs and ability to listen to your heart and lungs.

There are **several advantages** to this form of service:

- More people will have access to specialists in areas where they may not otherwise be available.
- A person does not have to drive long distances to come to see a healthcare provider.
- A person, too sick to travel, may find it easier to connect with a healthcare provider.
- Providers can assess whether you need to get to a nearby clinic or hospital.
- A person may avoid bringing an infection to a clinic or becoming infected by coming to a clinic.
- Telemedicine visit can be scheduled during a break at work, and decrease time off from work.

- A person does not have to sit for a long period of time in a crowded waiting room.
- People are more comfortable in their own surroundings and a telemedicine visit can feel like a home visit from your healthcare provider.
- Cost is often comparable to a clinic visit.
- Parents with small children may find it easier to connect virtually rather than bringing their children to the clinic visit.

Who is a candidate for a telemedicine visit?

This form of clinical practice is well suited for the management of chronic disorders like diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep apnea, and certain long-term lung diseases such as patients with stable emphysema or asthma. If you are experiencing chest pain, shortness of breath, pain that will not resolve, fainting, confusion, or other serious symptoms, you should contact a healthcare provider right away and you may not be able to be managed using telemedicine.

Many devices like glucometers, CPAP machines, blood pressure monitors and oxygen saturation level testing (pulse oximeters) are able to send information to the providers electronically. If a person has one of

these devices, getting this data ahead of time will help the provider prepare for the clinic visit.

What you will need to do a telemedicine visit?

If your visit is from your home, you will need a high-speed internet with either a computer with a camera or a smart phone. You do not need any special equipment if your visit is scheduled at a clinic.

How does this work? What happens at the time of the visit?

Your healthcare provider's office will provide you with information about how the telemedicine service works. They will go over the information with you in detail, either by phone or electronically. You will need to give consent for the visit just as you would for a clinic visit. It is typically set up to work from either a smart phone (iPhone or Android), tablet (iPad or similar device) or a computer with a camera. You will be given a web link or an App to download to your device and then you will need to set up your account. Once this is set up, you will receive an invitation for a 'virtual' telemedicine visit.

At the time of the clinic visit, you will simply have to click on the invitation that you received by either email or text message to connect. You will be able to visit with your provider as you would in the office. There are some differences—you will not have a physical examination like the one you would when you come to the office. You may not be able to talk to other team members at the same visit such as a social worker or dietician. You can ask to have another team member call you separately.

You cannot use FaceTime® or Skype® as these may not protect privacy of your medical information. You can only use the secure system that your healthcare provider has in place. At the time of your visit, the healthcare provider will have access to your medical record for reference.

Limitations to the use of this technology

There is concern over loss of the personal contact with the provider. The providers often choose to see their patients in the office at every other visit to maintain the close physician patient contact.

Not all healthcare providers are certified to provide telemedicine. Your provider may not have access to the equipment needed for this type of visit. You can talk to your provider about whether this is a type of visit that will work for you.

COVID-19 pandemic and Insurance Coverage

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Medicare has expanded options for patients and healthcare providers to use telemedicine. These measures are being encouraged to aid in social distancing and to protect medically vulnerable patients from exposure to COVID-19.

Author: Shalini Manchanda, MD

Reviewers: Marianna Sockrider, MD, DrPH,
Fady Jamous, MD, and Gary Ewart.

Rx Action Steps

- ✓ Many healthcare provider office, clinic and hospital websites have messages about scheduling virtual visits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ask your healthcare provider about whether telemedicine is an option for you.
- ✓ If you are sick, contact your healthcare provider to see if you need to be seen in-person. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this step is especially important so that people do not spread illness to others.
- ✓ Before your virtual visit, read over the instructions your provider sent you so you are ready for your visit.
- ✓ Many telemedicine services are now covered by Medicare, Medicaid, or your private insurance. Check with your healthcare provider or insurance provider to see which services are covered.

Healthcare Provider's Contact Number:

Resources

American Thoracic Society

- www.thoracic.org/patients/

HealthIT.gov

- <https://www.healthit.gov/topic/health-it-initiatives/telemedicine-and-telehealth>

This information is a public service of the American Thoracic Society. The content is for educational purposes only. It should not be used as a substitute for the medical advice of one's healthcare provider.

