

Engaging Patients Using Telehealth

Overview

Telehealth enables health care providers to expand access to care. In response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), more providers are offering virtual care (for diagnosis, treatment, consultation, education, etc.) to limit exposure to COVID-19 and maintain connections with patients, especially those with chronic illness.¹ Telehealth is a practical tool to engage patients in meaningful ways that ensure continuity and allow patients to be more active participants in their care.²



Patient engagement is a continuous process in which providers, patients, and caregivers work together to improve health. Engaged patients are able to make more informed decisions about their care options.³ As a catalyst for trust in the provider and patient relationship, patient engagement in telehealth requires standards of professionalism equal to in-person interactions. Also important is exhibiting ease and proficiency using technology when interacting with patients.⁴

In using telehealth, as with in-person care, follow ethical guidelines such as:

- *Taking steps to ensure care continuity;*
- *Protecting confidentiality of patients' electronic data while receiving, storing, and transferring the data; and*
- *Respecting the patient's decisions about their care and participating in telehealth.*

Provider Tips

Patients engaged in their own care often experience better health outcomes.⁵ Social distancing during a public health emergency has increased patient awareness and willingness to try telehealth.⁶ The following themes support virtual care and successful patient engagement: (1) personalization, (2) access to necessary resources, (3) commitment to delivering quality care, and (4) building a positive patient-provider relationship.⁷

Tailor communication and services

Communication between patients and providers should reflect the provider's commitment to the patients' health and be respectful of their unique preferences, values, and health goals.⁸ Understand patient goals and

¹ Healthcare Innovation, Will the COVID-19 Telemedicine Revolution Permanently Change Chronic Care? Available at: www.hcinnovationgroup.com/covid-19/article/21133046/will-the-covid19-telemedicine-revolution-permanently-change-chronic-care.

² American Medical Association (AMA), Telehealth Implementation Playbook. Available at: www.ama-assn.org/system/files/2020-04/ama-telehealth-playbook.pdf.

³ World Health Organization, Patient Engagement, 2016. Available at: apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/252269/9789241511629-eng.pdf;jsessionid=B329DBC34226C689EF27354824CF076?sequence=1.

⁴ AMA, Ethical Practice in Telemedicine. Available at: www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/ethics/ethical-practice-telemedicine.

⁵ Barello S, Triberti S, Graffigna G, et.al, eHealth for Patient Engagement: A Systematic Review. *Front. Psychol.*, (2016). Available at: www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.02013/full.

⁶ Healthcare IT News, Survey: Americans' perceptions of telehealth in the COVID-19 era. Available at: www.healthcareitnews.com/news/survey-americans-perceptions-telehealth-covid-19-era.

⁷ Patient Engagement HIT, How Can Healthcare Professionals Define Patient Engagement? Available at: patientengagementhit.com/news/how-can-healthcare-professionals-define-patient-engagement.

⁸ Health IT Outcomes, Consistent Communication Helps Providers Deliver Better Healthcare Experiences, March 2019. Available at: www.healthitoutcomes.com/doc/consistent-communication-helps-providers-deliver-better-healthcare-experiences-0001.

share enthusiasm for helping them reach those goals; consider having a care team member follow up with patients or engage caretakers.⁹

- Use multiple communication methods (e.g., patient portal, website, email, text messages, phone calls) to:¹⁰
 - Showcase benefits of telehealth, including increased convenience and access to specialized care;
 - Educate patients about using telehealth with guidance on things like downloading needed applications, the telehealth process and what to expect, and payment and billing;
 - Collect patient satisfaction feedback and schedule follow-up care; and,
 - Keep patients up to date on new telehealth services and capabilities available to them.
- Recognize patient culture and beliefs that influence their engagement in care; arrange for a language service or interpreter if needed.¹¹



Prepare needed information and resources

Educating patients about their health, treatment plans, potential outcomes, and other information can empower patients and equips them with the knowledge necessary to make healthcare decisions.¹²

- Make available information on frequently asked questions before and during the telehealth interaction, including topics such as:^{13, 14}
 - Verifying patient identity by providing personal information or documentation;
 - Maintaining privacy and confidentiality of patient information;
 - Collecting patient consent to participate in telehealth service(s);
 - Providing feedback following the telehealth encounter; and,
 - Scheduling follow up care if needed.
- During the telehealth encounter, provide visual materials (e.g., pain scales, visual care instructions) that are specific, clear, and concise to improve patient/caregiver understanding.^{15, 16}

Don't let technology impede quality

Attentiveness to patients and their needs (above technology highlights or challenges) is central to principles of respect and

⁹ AMA, Digital Health Implementation Playbook Step 9: Patient Partnership. Available at: www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/digital/digital-health-implementation-playbook-step-9-patient-partnership.

¹⁰ See n. 2, *Supra*.

¹¹ Nickel W, Weinberger S, Guze P, Principles for Patient and Family Partnership in Care: An American College of Physicians Position Paper, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, (2018). Available at: annals.org/aim/fullarticle/2716698/principles-patient-family-partnership-care-american-college-physicians-position-paper.

¹² Patient Engagement HIT, The Difference Between Patient Education and Patient Health Literacy, June 2017. Available at: patientengagementhit.com/news/the-difference-between-patient-education-and-health-literacy.

¹³ See n. 2, *Supra*.

¹⁴ AHIMA, Telemedicine Toolkit (2017). Available at: healthsectorcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/AHIMA-Telemedicine-Toolkit.pdf.

¹⁵ See n. 2, *Supra*.

¹⁶ Hersh L, Salzman B, Snyderman D, Health Literacy in Primary Care, *Am Fam Physician*, (2015). Available at: aafp.org/afp/2015/0715/p118.html.

dignity for patients as active participants in their own care.¹⁷

- Review and familiarize yourself with the patient’s health record before initiating a virtual visit.
- Ask targeted questions about the present illness and health history following key clinical guidelines.
- Familiarize yourself with common technical concerns (e.g., echoing audio, allowing access to the camera and microphone, browser compatibility) to help patients deal with issues they might encounter.

Build a positive relationship with patients and caregivers

Engaging patients as partners in health care requires patient-provider relationships founded on trust. Telehealth can help build strong connections between providers and their patients when competent care is provided.¹⁸

- Don’t neglect the human experience; patients will be more satisfied with a telehealth encounter if they feel the care is customized and important, and the provider maintains a warm and personal bedside manner.¹⁹
- Setting expectations about what patient data will look like and what data points are normal vs. those that may cue the need for medical intervention.²⁰
- Include patient’s family members in the engagement/education process.²¹

Preparing patients and caregivers to use telehealth helps ensure they...²²

- Are confident with the technology;
- Participate and generate accurate data;
- Know how their data will contribute to their care; and
- Feel empowered to troubleshoot issues.

Additional Resources

- American Medical Association (AMA), Telehealth Playbook www.ama-assn.org/system/files/2020-04/ama-telehealth-playbook.pdf
- Maryland Health Care Commission (MHCC), Telehealth Virtual Resource Center mhcc.maryland.gov/mhcc/Pages/hit/hit_telemedicine/hit_telemedicine_virtual_resource.aspx
- The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC), Patient Engagement Playbook www.healthit.gov/playbook/pe/

Questions?

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¹⁷ Nickel W, Weinberger S, Guze P, Principles for Patient and Family Partnership in Care: An American College of Physicians Position Paper, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, (2018). Available at: annals.org/aim/fullarticle/2716698/principles-patient-family-partnership-care-american-college-physicians-position-paper.

¹⁸ AMA, Ethical Practice in Telemedicine. Available at: ama-assn.org/delivering-care/ethics/ethical-practice-telemedicine.

¹⁹ For more information on making the most of a telehealth visit see MHCC’s Making the Virtual Visit A Success – Provider Tips for Telehealth, available at: mhcc.maryland.gov/mhcc/pages/hit/hit/documents/HIT_Telehealth_Visit_Flyer.pdf.

²⁰ See n. 2, *Supra*.

²¹ MHCC, Remote patient Monitoring Telehealth Grants, Brief and Final Reports, (March 2017). Available at: mhcc.maryland.gov/mhcc/pages/hit/hit_telemedicine/documents/Telehealth_Brief_Reports_FINAL_031617.pdf.

²² See n. 2, *Supra*.