

Making the Virtual Visit a Success

Provider Tips for Telehealth

Overview

Health care providers can leverage telecommunications technologies to interact, diagnose, and advise patients remotely with implementation of telehealth. Patients report high satisfaction with telehealth.¹ Several factors, including verbal and non-verbal communication during a telehealth visit (i.e., provider ability to explain, listen, and empathize with a patient) can lead to an effectual virtual visit.^{2, 3} This flyer highlights noteworthy considerations for providers operating in a virtual environment and forming provider-patient relationships through telehealth.

Provider Tips

The following can help ensure a positive patient and provider telehealth experience.^{4, 5}

- *Technology* – Test your telehealth equipment, software, services, and needed telecommunication connections (e.g., bandwidth and internet connectivity quality).
- *Behavioral Cues* – Ensure eye contact by adjusting the webcam to eye level; inform the patient when taking actions like writing a note in the patient’s record.
- *Communication* – Have introductory language prepared; ask the patient if they can see and hear you clearly before getting started; discuss next steps with the patient (e.g., schedule follow-up, treatment instructions, prescription pick-up, etc.)

- *Physical Space* – Consider the exam room from the patient’s perspective; designate a space that has adequate lighting, is private, and is free from distraction.
- *Punctuality* – Be on time and ensure a way to notify the patient if there is a delay.
- *Feedback* – Assess patient comfort with virtual visits; ask the patient to provide feedback during the visit or afterwards via a brief survey.



Patient Assurance

Patients trust providers to place their welfare above other interests, provide information needed to make informed decisions about their care, respect privacy and confidentiality, and take steps to ensure continuity of care.⁶

¹ Polinski JM, Barker T, Gagliano M, et al., Patients’ Satisfaction with and Preference for Telehealth Visits, *J Gen Intern Med* (2016). Available at: link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11606-015-3489-x.

² Terry C, Cain J, The Emerging Issue of Digital Empathy, *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* (2016). Available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4891856/.

³ HealthcareITNews, Patient advocates: Tech can help improve experience, but empathy is most important. Available at: www.healthcareitnews.com/news/patient-advocates-tech-can-help-improve-experience-empathy-most-important.

⁴ Becker’s Hospital Review, Analysis: 5 insights into ‘websites’ manner. Available at: www.beckershospitalreview.com/telehealth/analysis-5-insights-into-websites-manner.html.

⁵ University of Arizona, Arizona Telemedicine Program, Using Telemedicine to Make Your Telemedicine Encounters Effective. Available at: telemedicine.arizona.edu/blog/using-telemedicine-make-your-telemedicine-encounters-effective.

⁶ American Medical Association (AMA), Code of Medical Ethics: Patient-physician relationships. Available at: www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/ethics/code-medical-ethics-patient-physician-relationships.

The following can reinforce provider-patient relationships when using telehealth.⁷

- *Competency* – Recognize there may be limitations with certain telehealth technologies; use professional judgment to determine the best modality of care for a given patient, including determining when to shift from telehealth to in-person care to maintain an equal standard of care.
- *Transparency and Consent* – Obtain and document patient consent for telehealth services in the patient’s medical record.
- *Privacy and Security* – Comply with HIPAA and adhere to other privacy and security best practices (e.g., using data encryption and unique individual logins and passwords) to ensure confidentiality.
- *Fidelity* – Minimize and disclose financial or other interests (e.g., investment in a health care facility) and take active steps to manage or eliminate bias.
- *Care Continuity* – Provide patients with recommendations for follow-up care when appropriate; encourage patient relationships with community-based providers as needed who can coordinate care and handle complex medical issues that cannot be addressed via telehealth.

Applying Your Best Interpersonal Skills⁸

- Address patients by name for a less formal, more personal tone, which can help the patient feel more comfortable.
- Introduce yourself and explain your role to strengthen the doctor-patient relationship during and after the telehealth visit.
- Allow the patient ample, uninterrupted time to share concerns that may inform a diagnosis.
- Recognize patient concerns to validate their participation and ensure symptoms are not ignored or dismissed.
- Acknowledge when more information or a specialist consultation is needed to increase patient confidence in the diagnosis and treatment plan.

Resources

- American Medical Association (AMA), Ethical Practice in Telemedicine www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/ethics/ethical-practice-telemedicine
- AMA StepsForward, Telemedicine, Connect to Specialists and Facilitate Better Access to Care for Your Patients edhub.ama-assn.org/steps-forward/module/2702689
- Maryland Health Care Commission, Telehealth Virtual Resource Center mhcc.maryland.gov/mhcc/Pages/hit/hit_telemedicine/hit_telemedicine_virtual_resource.aspx



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⁷ See n. 2, *Supra*.

⁸ mHealthIntelligence, A Telehealth Primer: 5 Tips to Making the Virtual Visit a Success. Available at: mhealthintelligence.com/news/a-telehealth-primer-5-tips-to-making-the-virtual-visit-a-success.