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Telehealth
What it is, How it Works, and Getting Started

What is telehealth?

Telehealth is a great way to practice social distancing while still getting the health care you need. Telehealth allows you to receive "virtual care" from a health care provider located in a different location (such as a physician, nurse practitioner, behavioral health professional, clinical social worker, etc.). It's a convenient and safe alternative to in-person care, eliminating the need to travel or sit in a waiting room.[1] All you need is a computer, tablet, or smartphone.

What types of care can I receive?

If you need care, telehealth is an option to get treatment for a wide variety of non-life threatening issues.[2] Some examples include:

- General health care, like wellness visits;

- Prescriptions for medicine;

- Specialty care;

- Nutrition counseling;

- Mental health counseling; and

- Urgent care conditions, such as sinusitis, back pain, urinary tract infections, common rashes, etc.[3]

Not all care can be delivered using telehealth. It's important to call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room if you have a life-threatening injury, illness, or major trauma.[4]

What are the benefits?

Telehealth makes it easier to access care, especially in rural areas or during a public health emergency (e.g., COVID-19).[5] It reduces the risk of illness by eliminating exposure to other sick people in a waiting room. This is beneficial if you are higher risk for severe illness due to age or an underlying medical condition.[6] Virtual care can also relieve stress since you can talk to a provider in the comfort and safety of your home.[7] It may be an option to discuss test results or progress after surgery with your provider.[8] Just like in-person visits, your information is completely confidential.

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[1] American Telemedicine Association (ATA), *Telehealth Basics*. Available at: www.americantelemed.org/resource/why-telemedicine/.
[2] The Conversation, *What can you use a telehealth consult for and when should you physically visit your GP?,* April 1, 2020. Available at: theconversation.com/what-can-you-use-a-telehealth-consult-for-and-when-should-you-physically-visit-your-gp-135046.
[3] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), *Understanding telehealth*. Available at: telehealth.hhs.gov/patients/understanding-telehealth/.
[4] GoodRx. *What Is Telemedicine?,* April 3, 2020. Available at: www.goodrx.com/blog/what-is-telemedicine/.
[5] ATA. *Telemedicine Benefits*. Available at: legacy.americantelemed.org/main/about/about-telemedicine/telemedicine-benefits.
[6] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *People Who Are at Higher Risk for Severe Illness*. Available at: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html.
[7] Northwest Regional Telehealth Resource Center, *The Benefits of Telehealth*. Available at: nrtrc.org/telehealth-topic-20.
[8] TigerConnect, *14 Benefits of Telehealth: Why Telehealth is Transforming Healthcare*. Available at: tigerconnect.com/blog/14-benefits-of-telehealth-why-telehealth-is-transforming-healthcare/.

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How does it work?

There are different ways to connect with your provider that does not require an in-person interaction. This includes:

- Scheduling a virtual visit using video (similar to Apple FaceTime or Facebook Messenger video chat);

- Sending and receiving messages from your provider (using secure email or text messaging); and

- Collecting and transmitting information (such as vitals, pulse oxygenation, and blood glucose) through a web-enabled device to be monitored remotely by a provider.[9]

You might need to download an application to your computer, tablet, or smartphone, and set up an account online. For virtual visits, you may be asked to wait in a virtual waiting room before connecting with your provider.[10] It's a good idea to write down your symptoms and any questions you have for the provider. Similar to when you are seen in-person, have the following information available: medical history; medications and pharmacy; insurance; and emergency contact.[11]

How do I get started?

Many providers now offer virtual care in response to the COVID-19 public health crisis. Most health insurance plans also sponsor their own telehealth program. As a first step, check with your health insurance plan – you most likely have coverage for telehealth, though you may need to pay for a portion of the cost through a copayment or deductible. Next, talk to your provider to see if telehealth is an option for you. Your provider may have select days and hours to schedule a virtual visit.   If your provider does not offer telehealth, check out www.techhealthdirectory.com[12] for online companies that offer virtual care on-demand 24/7. These companies may accept insurance or charge a flat fee for a virtual visit.

Resources

US Department of Health and Human Services
telehealth.hhs.gov/patients/

American Telemedicine Association
www.americantelemed.org/resource/why-telemedicine/

Mayo Clinic
www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/telehealth/art-20044878

Questions?

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Connect with us on Twitter and Facebook

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[9] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), *Understanding telehealth*. Available at: telehealth.hhs.gov/patients/understanding-telehealth/.

[10] HIMSS, *A Patient's Guide to Telemedicine: What to Do When Your Doctor Calls or Video-Chats with You*, March 25, 2020. Available at: www.himss.org/news/patients-guide-telemedicine.

[11] WebMD. *How Does Telemedicine Work?* Available at: www.webmd.com/lung/how-does-telemedicine-work#2.

[12] MHCC does not certify or endorse any telehealth technology, software, applications, or products.