

Featured Story



Guide to Telehealth - Then, Now, Tomorrow

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Healthcare providers have employed various forms of telehealth since long before the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Telehealth delivers knowledge and expertise to people and places that need it. A movement that largely began as a way to improve access to healthcare in rural communities saw explosive growth in 2020.

Today, telehealth is in wide use and here to stay.

What is telehealth?

The US [Health Resources and Services Administration](#) defines telehealth as any electronic information and telecommunications technology that is used to support and promote long-distance clinical healthcare, patient and professional health-related education, public health and health administration. Telehealth technologies benefit providers, healthcare organizations and patients.

The importance of telehealth

The key to maintaining population health and lowering expenditures is delivering timely access to high-quality care.

The US is struggling to improve the quality of healthcare and make the needed shift to value-based models. Innovative telehealth solutions that addressed our country's worsening healthcare access problem reached the point of widespread adoption in 2020, when the pandemic pushed the healthcare system to its limits.

Telehealth increases convenience of care and access while decreasing costs and maximizing physician time. Providers, payers and employers are increasingly adopting various and connected types of telehealth solutions to improve healthcare operations and patient outcomes. Patients embrace the convenience, safety, accessibility and flexibility of telehealth options.

What can telehealth do

Several types of telehealth technologies are either in use or under development. These include:

- mHealth (or mobile health)
- Video and audio technologies
- Digital photography
- Remote patient monitoring (RPM)
- Store and forward telehealth technology (commonly referred to as asynchronous telehealth) such as electronic consultations (eConsults).

Telehealth technology providers are expanding telehealth system offerings to address physician/specialist shortages, patient engagement and satisfaction, and provider communication, education, and satisfaction.

How telehealth works

Many types of telehealth platforms in use broadly facilitate communication. Digital communication between providers, healthcare organizations, supporting staff, and patients increases the speed of conveying information which can be documented and tracked in a scalable way.

Text messages, instant messages, email and video/phone conferences enable physicians and patients to connect when it is convenient for them. Alternative modes of communication also improves access to providers for patients in rural and remote communities.

How telehealth saves money

Telehealth is the linchpin of value-based care, enabling healthcare organizations to effectively allocate resources, facilitate access to care, and reduce patient and provider exposure to COVID-19 and other contagions. Video and messaging telehealth platforms make it possible for healthcare providers to triage patients and ensure they're seen in the most effective care setting.

Remote patient monitoring (RPM) systems allow patients and their providers to proactively monitor conditions. This reduces unnecessary visits and optimizes time spent with physicians. In 2018, RPMs were projected to save global healthcare systems \$200 billion in healthcare costs over the next 25 years.

eConsults transform healthcare

Healthcare delivery was already in the midst of transformation prior to the pandemic. COVID-19 simply accelerated this trend. The CDC reported that 30 percent of weekly health center visits occurred via telehealth in November 2020.

eConsults transforms healthcare in important ways:

- eConsults **provide more patient options**: Healthcare is becoming more consumer-centric, driven by an increased demand in patients' expectations for high quality, convenient, and affordable care.
- eConsults **create more resources and addresses healthcare shortages**: eConsults equip healthcare facilities with a suite of tools that facilitate access to PCP and specialists while meeting patients in settings that make the most sense. There is a severe shortage of providers nationwide, and we must utilize the right tools at the right time to match patients to the right resources in the right place.
- eConsults **addresses systemic inequities**: The COVID pandemic exposed significant inequities in our healthcare infrastructure, particularly for vulnerable and underserved populations. eConsults help close gaps in care by improving access for poor, rural, and minority communities. Telehealth holds the promise to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate access to care through expanded networks and to help close gaps in care and address social determinants of health.

The CDC's own data has shown that region and urbanicity are strongly associated with telehealth use. A February survey of over 750 healthcare leaders by the Medical Group Management Association found that 65 percent of respondents plan to either maintain or increase telehealth usage, with just 35 percent planning to decrease usage.

Patient demand combined with convenience are the main reasons that 31 percent of healthcare leaders planned to increase telehealth utilization.

eConsults improve patient outcomes

eConsults improve outcomes by refining and enhancing the way healthcare organizations deliver care. Tools like eConsults and video/audio platforms allow healthcare organizations to more easily allocate resources, continuously improve processes, and maintain ongoing channels of communication in an unprecedented way.

eConsults also present patient benefits:

- eConsults **can help mitigate the looming nursing shortage**: Over 500,000 RNs will retire by 2022, right at the time when a demand for care increases because of an aging population. eConsults help mitigate a shortage in nursing staff by giving patients remote and immediate access to nurses via clinics, offices, and even within nurses' homes.
- eConsults **save time**: In a survey by healthcare measurement and analytics platform, SPH Analytics, 70 percent of patients said they preferred virtual over in-person visits. The reason was not because it kept them safer from COVID-19, but because it saved them time. Avoiding sick people was the second most cited reason that patients preferred telehealth visits.
- eConsults **offer flexibility**: Convenience and safety are at the top of the list of patient-focused benefits for eConsults, but flexibility is another key advantage.

HIPAA compliance and telehealth platforms

The Office for Civil Rights, a division of the DHH, is responsible for overseeing and enforcing HIPAA regulations. DHH has stated that COVID-19 is a nationwide public emergency and, as such, covered health care providers can use any audio or video technology to provide telehealth services to patients during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Per the DHH, "OCR will exercise its enforcement discretion and will not impose penalties for noncompliance with the regulatory requirements under the HIPAA Rules against covered health care providers in connection with the good faith provision of telehealth during the COVID-19 nationwide public health emergency. This notification is effective immediately."

Complete details about telehealth and HIPAA enforcement during COVID-19 can be found at [HHS.gov](https://www.hhs.gov). The website also provides a list of vendors that represent that they provide HIPAA-compliant video communication products.

Telehealth services covered by Medicare

Medicare-covered telehealth services include office visits, psychotherapy, consultations, and certain other medical or health services from an eligible provider who isn't at your location using an interactive 2-way telecommunications system (like real-time audio and video).

In 2019, Medicare updated telehealth coverage to include virtual check-ins and e-visits. This includes remote patient monitoring, video conferencing and asynchronous platforms such as eConsults.

Telehealth services covered by Medicaid

Medicaid.gov defines telemedicine as a service that "seeks to improve a patient's health by permitting two-way, real-time interaction between the patient, and the physician or practitioner at the distant site."

Beyond this broad definition, Medicaid.gov does not list specific covered services, but gives each state the flexibility and discretion over whether to cover telemedicine and what types of telemedicine to cover. Other state-by-state variables, per Medicaid, include:

- Where telehealth can be covered in the state
- How telehealth is provided/covered
- What types of telemedicine practitioners/providers may be covered/reimbursed, as long as such practitioners/providers are "recognized" and qualified according to Medicaid statute/regulation
- How much to reimburse for telemedicine services providing payments do not exceed Federal Upper Limits

As of Fall 2020, The Center for Connected Health Policy's 50-state survey of state telehealth laws included the following coverage highlights:

- 50 states and DC provide reimbursement for some form of live video in Medicaid fee-for-service.
- 18 states provide reimbursement for store-and-forward.
- 4 jurisdictions (HI, MS, NH, and NJ) have laws requiring Medicaid reimburse for store-and-forward but do not have an official Medicaid policy indicating this is occurring.
- 21 state Medicaid programs provide reimbursement for remote patient monitoring.
- 2 Medicaid programs (HI and NJ) have laws requiring Medicaid reimburse for RPM but did not have an official Medicaid policy when we conducted our research.
- 16 states limit the type of facility that can serve as an originating site.
- 32 state Medicaid programs offer a transmission or facility fee when telehealth is used.
- 43 states and DC currently have a law that governs private payer telehealth reimbursement policy.

Will telehealth continue after COVID-19?

The year 2020 was a tipping point for healthcare innovation, forcing healthcare organizations to pivot in the face of the pandemic. Numerous organizations rose to the challenge, successfully speeding up the adoption and implementation of effective solutions to improve the provision of care.

Doximity's [2020 State of Telemedicine Report](#) examines patient and physician adoption of telemedicine solutions since the COVID-19 pandemic. Key findings reveal that:

- From 2019 to 2020, the number of physicians reporting telehealth as a skill increased 38 percent.
- Since the coronavirus pandemic began, the number of Americans participating in at least one telemedicine visit increased 57 percent.
- The financial value of telemedicine visits is projected to be \$106 billion by 2023

The future of telehealth

We have a severe shortage of providers in the U.S. Telehealth supplies providers with the right tools at the right time to match patients to the right resources. As healthcare becomes more consumer-centric, more patients seek options like telehealth that deliver fast, convenient and affordable care at the highest quality.

As we adapt our care delivery models in the future, we need to keep an eye on reducing the stark inequalities that the pandemic has spotlighted. Modalities like telehealth hold the promise to close this care gap by providing culturally and linguistically appropriate access to care.

We've turned a page to the next chapter in healthcare delivery for the U.S. Telehealth presents a new delivery system that enables providers to safely and efficiently allocate our precious healthcare resources, while keeping the patient at the center.