

COVID-19: Using Telehealth to Reduce Your Risk

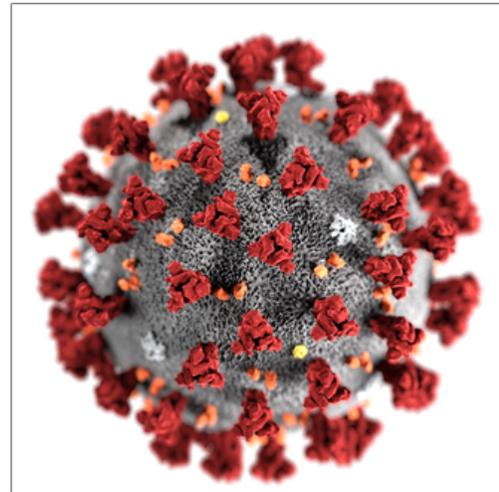
As a nation and throughout the world, we are experiencing unprecedented and challenging times as we cope with the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

COVID-19 is a new disease and there is limited information about why some people experience a mild form of the disease, while for others symptoms are severe. We do know that one of the best ways to prevent the disease is social distancing. But what happens when you have a doctor's appointment? It is impossible to be socially distant in most healthcare settings.

To make sure you get the high-quality care you need, many healthcare providers are offering video or phone visits instead of asking you to come in-person to their office. When possible, these options allow you to get great care without risking being exposed to individuals with COVID-19 or exposing others to the virus.

What is telehealth?

Telehealth is the use of digital and communication technologies, such as computers, smart phones or telephones to receive healthcare services away from your doctor's office. You may hear it called



telemedicine or digital health. It has been in use for a while, but has recently gained acceptance due to the pandemic.

There are several ways to get telehealth care. Call your healthcare team and find out if you can attend your appointment:

- ➔ **By Phone.** Using a landline phone, flip cell phone, or smartphone so you can talk with your provider about your clinical condition. Some healthcare systems offer an advice line handled by nurses that can answer your medical questions or refer you to another provider.
- ➔ **By Email.** Using email to detail your symptoms and even provide a picture of an injury or concern. Your provider may email you back or suggest a telehealth or in-person visit.

- **By Video.** Using an online interactive video, like Zoom or Facetime, to discuss your clinical needs with your provider face-to-face.
- **By Smart Phone Application.** Using an application, sometimes called an “App,” that you can download to a smartphone or desktop computer to send messages so you can share your clinical needs and concerns through an on-demand video appointment or messaging option.
- **Remote Patient Monitoring (RPM).** Using technology, doctors can monitor your vital signs and data from a distance. They may provide equipment for you to use in your own home, or it can be tracked via an app on a smartphone. Either way, RPM can be a very effective way of assessing and monitoring a patient’s health from afar.

What are the benefits of telehealth?

- **No exposure to other diseases, like the coronavirus.** You can visit with your doctor in the safety of your home.
- **Improved care quality.** Real-time connections improve health and increase your satisfaction.
- **Empowered to manage your care.** Increased support and connectivity make you a more active participant in your own care.
- **Reduced travel costs.** Physical and financial costs associated with travel are removed.
- **Get the most appropriate care that meets your needs, including for those who require end-of-life care.** You can be surrounded by your loved ones, especially in the age of COVID-19.

What types of healthcare visits can telehealth replace?

If you have an in-person visit scheduled, contact your provider and ask whether the appointment can be changed to a video or phone visit to help reduce exposure for you and other patients. Providers will follow the rules specific to your state regarding telehealth.

- **Initial visits.** You can explain your symptoms, send photos of the area of concern, and if on video, tilt the camera to an area of concern. You can also ask about an interaction or symptom that makes you think you might have contracted the coronavirus. Your doctor can prescribe and order medications.
- **Follow-up visits.** It is easier for both you and your doctor to have a follow-up appointment, reducing missed appointments and improving your health care.
- **Disease management.** For conditions like heart disease, diabetes, or others that require regular monitoring, telehealth makes it easier and less expensive for patients to maintain control over their health. In some cases, your provider will need to give you specific equipment or ask you to download an application on your computer or smartphone.
- **Advance care planning.** If you have Medicare, you can receive two 30-minute advance care planning visits through telehealth (physician reimbursement codes, 99497 and 99498). Assessment of and advance care planning for a patient with cognitive impairment is also covered (physician reimbursement code 99483). If you have some other type of health

coverage, be sure to check with your health plan to see if these services are covered.

- Palliative and hospice care. Your doctor or hospice care provider can assess your medical needs, perform an examination and order medications electronically.
- Post-hospitalization care. Checking in with your provider via telehealth after surgery, particularly if you have questions about your health, can reduce the likelihood of you being readmitted to the hospital.
- Assisted living center support. Problems for those living in such facilities often occur at night or on weekends, making hospitalization the only option, even for less urgent problems. With telehealth, on-call doctors can conduct a remote visit to determine if hospitalization is necessary.

How can I use telehealth?

If you have an upcoming healthcare appointment or think you need to see your doctor, ask whether you can have a telehealth appointment.

Questions to Ask Your Provider About Telehealth

- Do I need special equipment for a telehealth visit? If you aren't comfortable with a computer or smartphone, ask if you can have a regular telephone call.
- What services can I get through telehealth? Your doctor will follow the rules for your state regarding the types of visits that can be done via telehealth.

- If I have to visit in person, how will I be protected from those with the coronavirus? Your provider should offer a waiting area away from other patients. For example, you may be put in an exam room right away to avoid close contact with others. You may also ask to wait in the car and have your provider call you when they are ready to have you go to an exam room.
- Is there a co-pay difference if I choose telehealth instead of an in-person visit? In many cases, the co-pay for a telehealth visit will be the same or it could be waived, but it is important to ask your doctor.
- How will you keep my health information secure? Find out whether your personal health information is secure even through a telehealth visit.

Preparing for Your Telehealth Appointment

- Practice using your device before the appointment. You'll want to be comfortable using the device, for example, how to unmute your audio or add video to a call.
- Have healthcare devices on hand if you have them. You may need things like a flashlight for viewing a sore throat, a blood pressure cuff for a heart patient, a thermometer to check for temperature, etc.
- Wear loose clothing. This will allow you to show your provider what is concerning you.
- Ask about a follow-up plan. Find out what you need to do next, such as schedule an in-person or follow-up telehealth visit, get a prescription, etc.

What if I don't have health insurance?

If you don't have health insurance, some local health centers offer healthcare over the phone or video. Use the following resources:

- [Find a Health Center tool](#) to locate a community health center in your area. Ask if they offer telehealth appointments.
- [Digital Health Directory](#) to find telehealth (referred to as telemedicine in the directory) options near you.

More Resources

From Compassion & Choices:

- [COVID-19: Understanding Your Options](#)
- [COVID-19: Advanced Care Planning](#)
- [COVID-19 Addendum to Advance Directive](#)
- [COVID-19: Dying in the Age of the Pandemic](#)
- [Plan Your Care Resource Center](#)

From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

- [Learn How the Virus is Spread](#)
- [How to Protect Yourself](#)
- [Steps to Take When You Are Sick](#)
- [Warning Signs](#)
- [Creating a Household Plan](#)