

Telehealth: A New Way to Connect with Healthcare Professionals during COVID-19

Whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, you've probably found yourself craving personal interactions during this time of physical distancing. Many of us have turned to technology from telephones, to video chats and conference calls to stay connected with family and friends. These virtual interactions are a lifeline that allows us to experience some sense of togetherness but when it comes to your health, is there any substitute for a face-to-face with your doctor or healthcare provider?

One area that is evolving very quickly during the COVID-19 pandemic is healthcare. The public health emergency has forced us to adopt digital health technologies to a greater degree than ever before. Here's what you need to know.

Healthcare Goes Virtual

Telehealth, or virtual visits, allows physicians and other health care providers to deliver services to their patients via phone or video. To protect older adults at a higher risk for COVID-19, Medicare participants are able to use telehealth for the duration of the public health crisis. Providers, including doctors, nurse practitioners, clinical psychologists, and licensed clinical social workers can now offer telehealth to patients in their homes so older adults can avoid going to a doctor's office or hospital where they would risk exposure to the virus.

Types of Remote Medicare Visits

Medicare has outlined three types of allowable remote healthcare visits:

- **Medicare telehealth visits:** Patients may use telecommunication technology for office, hospital visits and other services that normally occur in-person. This requires the use of a device such as an iPad, tablet, smartphone or laptop computer that has internet connection and audio and video capability (in other words, not just an audio-only telephone) to facilitate real-time communication between provider and patient.
- **Virtual Check-Ins:** Established Medicare patients may have a brief (5-10 minute) communication with practitioners via a number of communication devices including telephone or video.
- **E-Visits:** Established Medicare patients may have non-face-to-face patient-initiated communication with their doctors without going to the doctor's office by using online patient portals.

While a number of commercial health plans and The Veteran's Administration (VA) Hospitals are allowing the use of audio-only phones for telehealth visits, Medicare is not. Only the second two options, which are limited to existing patients, allow for the use of a telephone.

Virtual Health Resources

Have symptoms of COVID-19 but it is not an emergency?

The Remote Patient Monitoring Program utilizes Telehealth Services and Pandemic Health Workers (PHW) to provide virtual, in-home health and mental health services. This new program is available to anyone in the state regardless of whether they are insured. Pandemic Health Workers will digitally connect with patients who are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms and need to stay home or quarantine to protect themselves and others. Call the COVID-19 hotline at 833-673-5669. More information can be found [here](#).

It's important for everyone to keep in mind that urgent and emergent healthcare procedures will continue as scheduled in offices, clinics and hospitals. **Anyone experiencing acute health problems should still go to their nearest hospital emergency room.**

Need emotional support?

Call4Calm, The Illinois Department of Human Services' free-of-charge emotional support text line, is for any residents experiencing stress or mental health issues related to COVID-19. Just text "TALK" (or "HABLAR" for Spanish) to 5-5-2-0-2-0, to speak with a mental health professional. You'll receive a call from a counselor within 24 hours.

Resources for Veterans

If you are a military veteran and don't have an internet compatible device, you can get an iPad through the VA Tablet Loan Program. The iPads allow veterans to communicate with their doctors from home using a video calling app, as well as enabling them to easily track and send relevant health data. Ask your VA healthcare provider for more information.

Need help using technology?

This [website](#) will help you learn to use your smart phone, computer or tablet. Find hundreds of tutorials on topics like smart phone basics, web cameras, video conferencing, email, and more.

Need more information on telemedicine

See this [fact sheet](#)

To support our community while we shelter in place, AgeGuide will be sharing new resources each week to help older adults and their loved ones stay informed, healthy and connected. AgeGuide has also compiled resources to support older adult and families during COVID-19 on its website which will be updated regularly. To see our resource page, [click here](#).

AgeGuide Northeastern Illinois was established in 1974. Services funded or coordinated by AgeGuide meet the diverse needs of the most rapidly growing population in Illinois. Over 681,000 seniors age 60 and over live in the agency's eight-county service area:

DuPage, Grundy, Kane, Kankakee, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will Counties

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