

Beyond COVID-19:

Telehealth Solutions to Strengthen and Improve Care Delivery

The recent explosion in [telehealth use](#) comes as no surprise given the COVID-19 crisis. However, even before the coronavirus, more patients and doctors were seeing the value of telehealth. Patients and health care providers accept – and even prefer – digital technologies as an essential part of health care delivery. Using digital platforms to deliver care minimizes in-person visits, helping to keep patients and providers healthy during the time of COVID-19. And telehealth can improve access to care, especially in rural areas where a patient can connect with a doctor within seconds, rather than driving long distances for an office visit.

Telehealth can be a tool to reduce costs for both patients and providers. There are shared cost-saving benefits of telehealth, including better management of chronic diseases, reduced travel times, and fewer or shorter hospital stays. By delivering high-quality care through a convenient medium and at an affordable price, providers view telehealth as an effective and efficient way to improve care outcomes, reduce unnecessary and costly visits to the emergency department, and make certain that patients get the right care at the right time and in the right setting.

America's Health Insurance Plans (AHIP) recognizes the benefits of telehealth and has developed recommendations on how to utilize the very real benefits of telehealth to strengthen and improve care in America:

- **Include telehealth in value-based care arrangements:** Telehealth can be an important part of value-based arrangements, where convenient virtual check-ins with a primary care provider can help avoid more costly visits – and ensure stable income for health care providers even during a future health care crisis.
- **Leverage telehealth to more effectively triage sick or injured patients:** Remote providers can help sick patients avoid unnecessary stops on the way to receiving the care they need, which can be especially relevant in rural parts of the country where there may be significant distances between provider settings.
- **Adopt telehealth for provider-to-provider consultations:** Telehealth can be used as a provider-to-provider consultation tool, which can expand access to specialists that may not be available locally but does not necessarily require multiple providers to bill for the same evaluation.
- **Use telehealth to address a patient's social needs:** Providers may help patients with non-clinical needs, such as addressing issues with safe housing, healthy food, and supportive living environments. Increasing contact with patients can help a provider screen for social needs and offer solutions that would otherwise require a less-convenient in-person visit.
- **Adopt telehealth as part of a hybrid care delivery model:** Stakeholders should consider models that include both in-person and virtual care delivery elements. For example, a routine annual physical requires an in-person assessment, while other aspects of the visit can certainly be done virtually. Requiring the same payment for brick-and-mortar in-person care and virtual care limits a provider's ability to conduct visits that occur across mediums that may be easier for patients.
- **Be mindful of the limits of telephonic visits:** Audio-only telephonic visits can be an important tool for providers and patients to touch base or address questions pertaining to the patient's care. These types of audio-only visits are not equivalent to in-person visits in terms of intensity or provider "touch" and thus should not be paid for at the same rate as in-person visits. Standard of care also limits the types of medical services that could appropriately be conducted via an audio visit (e.g., dermatology). Coupling parity with audio-only coverage mandates that don't recognize this important standard of care distinction could result in increased fraud, waste and abuse in the states.

Telehealth is meeting the promise of patient care that is more affordable, accessible, and satisfactory. AHIP will continue to advocate for policies which encourage its growth.