



Interacting with the health system: Virtual health care

When virtual health can come in handy—and how to get the most out of it

Sometimes it can be challenging and frustrating to get care right when you need it. Luckily for many folks, medical care is as close as your smartphone. Most employers now offer virtual health care options—also known as telehealth, telemedicine, or virtual visits. These services provide a virtual connection to a doctor available when and where you need it.

A video visit with a board-certified physician, typically on a smartphone, can be accessed in a matter of minutes for a variety of needs and almost always costs less than a trip to the doctor’s office, walk-in clinic, or emergency room—on average about \$50. And the convenience of virtual care doesn’t mean sacrificing quality of care. Among consumers Fidelity surveyed that had used their employer’s virtual care benefits, 88% were satisfied with it.¹

But in which situations is it appropriate to choose a virtual care option? Here, we’ll walk through a few of the scenarios when virtual care may be the right choice, in addition to some tips to make your appointment as efficient and effective as possible.

DID YOU KNOW?

There may be various ways you can access virtual health care:



Your health insurance plan



Your doctor



As a stand-alone benefit



When should I use a video visit with a doctor?

You're on vacation

Avoid spending half a day making your way to an urgent care. Connect with a doctor virtually and go back to bed.

You have familiar symptoms

If you get sinus infections all the time, you know the drill. If it's not convenient to see your own doctor, you can make a video visit.

To connect with a dermatologist

Send pictures to a telemedicine doctor if you have a rash or other skin irritation.

You're not sure if you need an ER

Sometimes it's obvious that you need to go straight to the emergency room—chest pain, difficulty breathing, a bad bone break—but sometimes it's not. A virtual visit can advise you on your next move if you feel like you have the time for it. In one study, nearly one-fifth of consumers surveyed with employer-based insurance who have used virtual care said they would use it for emergency purposes.²

You need to talk to someone for your mental health

Many telemedicine providers allow you to schedule a time to talk to a therapist. You can even schedule a follow-up with the same doctor. Clinicians Fidelity surveyed reported that mental health was one of the types of care for which virtual care is most effective.³

You're managing a chronic condition

Research has shown that using virtual care to care for people with chronic diseases can improve medication adherence, commitment to self-management goals, and improve health outcomes.⁴ And a recent Fidelity survey found that doctors put chronic condition management at the top of the list of reasons to use virtual care.⁵

You need a follow-up appointment

One survey found that virtual care is most commonly used in doctors' offices for follow-up appointments.⁶ For example, video visits have been found to be effective for post-surgery follow-up care for certain procedures, such as orthopedic surgeries.⁷

What should I consider doing now?

- Check with your human resources department or search your benefits portal to find out what's available to you.
- Download the virtual health app and set up an account **before** you need it. Fill out your medical history, including any medication allergies.
- Consider buying an over-the-counter kit that includes a thermometer; pulse oximeter; blood pressure cuff; medical devices to check your throat, eyes, and ears; or other tools that may help you share more information with the doctor virtually.
- Let your regular doctors know that you are interested in video visits if they offer them.

Additional tips for your virtual health care experience

- Make sure you know what your next steps are following the visit (e.g., "Where should I go for that X-ray?"). If you don't, speak up!
- Let your virtual care doctor know with whom to share your visit summary in order to keep your primary care doctor informed.

Conclusion

Virtual care services can be a simple way to get your health care needs met quickly. Be sure to explore your health benefits carefully so you are aware of all the ways you can access this valuable resource.

¹ Fidelity Health Thought Leadership Health Benefits Consumer Survey, fall 2022. Q32: "How satisfied have you been with these benefits? (Telehealth)" Sample included 598 consumers with employer-sponsored insurance who used a telehealth benefit offered by their employer.

² PwC Health Research Institute, Medical Cost Trend: Behind the Numbers 2022, June 2021, <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/industries/health-industries/library/assets/pwc-hri-behind-the-numbers-2022.pdf>.

³ Fidelity Health Thought Leadership Clinician Survey, fall 2022. Q49: "How effective or ineffective do you think telehealth is for the following types of care?" Sample included 500 practicing primary care providers and chronic disease specialists.

⁴ "Telehealth Interventions to Improve Chronic Disease," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), accessed August 21, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/dhbsp/pubs/telehealth.htm>.

⁵ Fidelity Health Thought Leadership Clinician Survey, fall 2022. Q49: "How effective or ineffective do you think telehealth is for the following types of care?" Sample included 500 practicing primary care providers and chronic disease specialists.

⁶ PwC Health Research Institute, Top Health Industry Issues of 2021: Will a Shocked System Emerge Stronger?, December 2020, <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/industries-health-industries/assets/pwc-us-health-top-health-issues-2021.pdf>.

⁷ Liam T. Kane et al., "The Role of Telehealth as a Platform for Postoperative Visits Following Rotator Cuff Repair: A Prospective, Randomized Controlled Trial," *Journal of Shoulder and Elbow Surgery* 29, no. 4 (April 2020): 775–83. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32197766/>.

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