

Telemedicine benefits: For patients and professionals

Telemedicine is a method of providing medical care remotely, usually through video chat. Telemedicine offers a range of benefits for both patients and healthcare providers.

It is possible to access a wide range of care options through telemedicine services, including primary care consultations, psychotherapy, [physical therapy](#), and even some emergency services.

What is telemedicine?

Video chat is one method of providing telemedicine.

Telemedicine offers healthcare using digital devices such as computers and smartphones. In most cases, telemedicine uses video conferencing. However, some providers choose to offer care via email or phone messaging.

Many people use telemedicine with their usual healthcare provider. Others access virtual care using a dedicated telemedicine app.

Doctors and patients can use telemedicine to:

- assess whether or not the patient needs treatment in person
- provide certain kinds of medical care, such as [mental health](#) treatment and assessments for minor infections
- write or renew prescriptions
- offer certain types of therapy, such as speech and physical therapy

Telemedicine is useful in situations where the patient must practice physical distancing or is unable to attend a healthcare facility in person.

Benefits

Research generally finds that telemedicine works, even for serious medical conditions.

For example, [a 2017 meta-analysis](#) and systematic review of the use of telemedicine for treating chronic [heart failure](#) found benefits. These included lower admission rates, shorter hospital stays, and fewer deaths.

The sections below will discuss some of the possible benefits for patients and healthcare providers.

Benefits for patients

Telemedicine can help treat a range of medical conditions. It is most successful when a person seeks care from a qualified physician and provides clear details about their symptoms.

Some other benefits of telemedicine include:

- **Lower costs:** [Some research suggests](#) that people who use telemedicine spend less time in the hospital, providing cost savings. Also, less commuting time may mean fewer secondary expenses, such as childcare and gas.

- **[Improved access to care](#)**: Telemedicine makes it easier for people with disabilities to access care. It can also improve access for other populations, including older adults, people who are geographically isolated, and those who are incarcerated.
- **Preventive care**: Telemedicine may make it easier for people to access preventive care that improves their long-term health. This is especially true for people with financial or geographic barriers to quality care. For instance, [a 2012 study](#) of people with [coronary artery disease](#) found that preventive telemedicine improved health outcomes.
- **Convenience**: Telemedicine allows people to access care in the comfort and privacy of their own home. This may mean that a person does not have to take time off of work or arrange childcare.
- **Slowing the spread of infection**: Going to the doctor's office means being around people who may be sick, often in close quarters. This can be particularly dangerous for people with underlying conditions or weak immune systems. Telemedicine [eliminates the risk](#) of picking up an infection at the doctor's office.

Benefits for healthcare providers

Healthcare providers who offer telemedicine services may gain several benefits, including:

- **Reduced overhead expenses**: Providers who offer telemedicine services may incur fewer overhead costs. For example, they may pay less for front desk support or be able to invest in an office space with fewer exam rooms.
- **Additional revenue stream**: Clinicians may find that telemedicine supplements their income because it allows them to provide care to more patients.
- **Less exposure to illness and infections**: When providers see patients remotely, they do not have to worry about exposure to any pathogens the patient may carry.
- **Patient satisfaction**: When a patient does not have to travel to the office or wait for care, they may be happier with their provider.

Disadvantages

However, telemedicine may not suit every person or situation. There are some potential disadvantages when using telemedicine over traditional care methods.

The following sections look at some disadvantages for patients and healthcare providers.

Disadvantages for patients

Telemedicine is not a good fit for all patients. Some drawbacks of this type of care include:

- **Insurance coverage**: Not all insurers cover telemedicine. [Only 26 states](#) currently require insurers to cover or reimburse the costs of telemedicine. However, these laws are constantly changing.
- **Protecting medical data**: Hackers and other criminals may be able to access a patient's medical data, especially if the patient accesses telemedicine on a public network or via an unencrypted channel.
- **Care delays**: When a person needs emergency care, accessing telemedicine first may delay treatment, particularly since a doctor cannot provide life saving care or laboratory tests digitally.

Disadvantages for healthcare providers

Healthcare providers may also face some drawbacks associated with telemedicine, including:

- **Licensing issues**: State laws vary, and clinicians may not be able to practice medicine across state lines, depending on the state in which they hold their license and the state in which the patient lives.

- **Technological concerns:** Finding the right digital platform to use can be challenging. Also, a weak connection can make it difficult to offer quality care. Clinicians must also ensure that the telemedicine program they use is secure and fully compliant with privacy laws.
- **An inability to examine patients:** Providers must rely on patient self-reports during telemedicine sessions. This may require clinicians to ask more questions to ensure that they get a comprehensive health history. If a patient leaves out an important symptom that might have been noticeable during in-person care, this can compromise treatment.

When is telemedicine useful?

Telemedicine works well for any condition that does not require laboratory tests or a physical examination. Telemedicine can even offer some forms of ongoing care, such as psychotherapy.

When there are barriers to treatment — such as the COVID-19 pandemic, a patient who lives far away from a medical care facility, or a patient who cannot transport themselves — providers may expand the list of conditions they are willing to treat. For instance, a doctor might prescribe [antibiotics](#) for a likely infection via telemedicine.

Summary

Telemedicine is a convenient option for people who cannot go to the doctor's office and those who prefer to stay home. However, it is important that patients check the credentials of the doctor providing care.

For people with [anxiety](#) about leaving the house, chronic medical conditions that make catching infections dangerous, and contagious diseases, remote care may mean the difference between prompt treatment and no treatment at all.

Patients should provide detailed medical information, and when possible, they should show the doctor any rashes, injuries, or other visible symptoms that require treatment.