

COVID - 19 | The Impact on Telehealth

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Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the adoption of Telehealth services in an inpatient setting was growing at a rapid pace. According to a report by Definitive Healthcare, from 2014 to 2019, the Telehealth adoption rate for inpatient services increased from 54% to 85%. The rapid adoption of Telehealth services has been driven by the aging booming population, new legislation requiring health plans to cover Telehealth services, and the advancement of technology that improves the ease of use.

What is Telehealth?

The Health Resources Services Administration defines Telehealth as the use of electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support long-distance clinical health care, patient and professional health-related education, public health, and health administration. Technologies include videoconferencing, the internet, store-and-forward imaging, streaming media, and terrestrial and wireless communications.

What is the difference between Telehealth & Telemedicine?

Telehealth is different from telemedicine because it refers to a broader scope of remote healthcare services than telemedicine. While telemedicine refers specifically to remote clinical services, telehealth can refer to remote non-clinical services, such as provider training, administrative meetings, and continuing medical education, in addition to clinical services.

COVID-19 Impact on Telehealth & HIPAA Regulations

As the transmission of COVID-19 has spread throughout the US, federal and local governments have pushed to increase social distancing measures in order to decrease the speed of transmission of COVID-19. New social distancing measures have required healthcare providers to utilize telehealth services to provide care to patients. In response to the growing demand for telehealth services, the government enacted the CARES ACT, which waives telehealth restrictions for Medicare enrollees. Below are changes in telehealth rules highlighted in a recent report by McDermott Will & Emery, an international law firm.

Provider Relationship –The CARES ACT removes the three-year requirement that a provider or provider’s practice must have seen the patient in order to be reimbursed for the telemedicine service

Audio Only – Additionally The CARES ACT grants the provider autonomy in deciding whether to use audio-only or two-way audio-visual telehealth services

Rural and Urban sites – The CARES ACT also allows for patients at qualified rural and urban sites to be seen by the provider through telehealth

Dialysis patients – The legislation allows for the health assessment of home dialysis patients to be performed through telehealth

Patient monitoring – The CARES ACT encourages the use of telehealth services, including remote monitoring, to provide home health services

Health Savings account - The CARES ACT allows for a health savings account, connected to a high deductible, to cover telehealth services prior to hitting the deductible

Main Benefits of Telehealth During the COVID-19 Pandemic

“Flattening the Curve” - The primary benefit of telehealth and the changes to telehealth rules through the CARES ACT is to help slow the rapid spread of COVID-19 as well as allow providers to be able to continue to provide care to high-risk patients and the elderly.

Quarantined Providers can continue to Provide Care – Providers that are quarantined or in self-isolation due to potentially being exposed to COVID-19 can still provide care to patients.

Providers can provide care to COVID-19 Hotspots - Providers in markets that have been hit hard by COVID-19, such as the New York City Metro Area, are being overwhelmed with patients that have been displaying COVID-19 symptoms in addition to the routine care needed for uninfected patients. Telehealth allows providers that may not currently be burdened by the COVID-19 outbreak to assist those in the current hotspots by providing care remotely.

Concerns Regarding Telehealth?

Malpractice Protection – Providers will need to determine if their current policies cover services provided through telehealth.

Post-Pandemic – It is unclear at this time if the changes made by the CARES ACT will be reverted back to how it was prior to the COVID-19 outbreak.

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FURTHER READING

[Considerations for a Pandemic](#), Jason Henke, Director