What the end of the COVID-19 emergency means for telehealth

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As physicians navigate the post-public health emergency era, the AMA Telehealth Quick Guide will help them stay on top of the changing policy, payment and coding surrounding virtual health care visits.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, among other things the federal government:

- Lifted outdated restrictions on how and when Medicare patients could access virtual care.
- Eased rules that allowed physicians to reach Medicare and other patients through less secure platforms such as Zoom and FaceTime.
- Allowed physicians to prescribe controlled substances based on telehealth visits.
- Adjusted how much physicians got paid for certain virtual services.

Now the government is figuring out exactly what changes will stay, which will go and which may stay with some modifications. A number of the changes will stay in place until the end of 2023—some even slated to stay put until the end of 2024—while the government passes legislation or goes through the proper rule-making process to make changes permanent.

However, that doesn’t apply to all the modifications that physicians and their offices got accustomed to during the pandemic and exactly how some aspects of telehealth will be handled going forward is still being debated.

“Keeping up with updates will be challenging. The Telehealth Quick Guide will serve as the go-to place as updates evolve and the place for physicians to keep up to date on the changes,” said Stacy Lloyd, MPH, the AMA’s director of digital health and operations.

The guide will be updated monthly to ensure that physicians have the most accurate information.

Supporting telehealth is an essential component of the AMA Recovery Plan for America’s Physicians.
Telehealth is critical to the future of health care, which is why the AMA continues to lead the charge to aggressively expand telehealth policy, research and resources to ensure physician practice sustainability and fair payment.

The latest updates

The AMA created the Telehealth Quick Guide to track and summarize the fast-changing policy and coverage at the beginning of the nation’s public health emergency. It’s evolved to help physicians quickly access information about the post public health emergency landscape where telehealth is an integral part of care.

More than 80% of doctors used televisits in 2022, according to an AMA survey of more than 1,300 physicians. Nearly 70% of doctors said they want to keep providing telehealth services.

Physicians can go to the quick guide for:

- Information on which policy and waivers will expire and when related to telehealth, for example originating site requirements, covered services, HIPAA enforcement and more.
- Tips for optimizing telehealth now to be prepared for changes. This includes making sure your office’s technology is HIPAA-complaint and that you prepare patients for what they can expect if you are unable to offer certain services via telehealth and more.
- Updates to telehealth and digital medicine CPT codes, including those for telehealth visits, online digital visits, remote patient monitoring, self-measured blood pressure and telephone evaluation and management service.
- Updates to commercial payer coverage for telehealth

Learn more with the AMA about what is changing with the end of COVID-19 public health emergency (PDF), beyond telehealth.

Telehealth’s next phase

Among some of the changes that the guide highlights:

- Medicare coverage and payment for audio-only services will continue through December 2024.
- Nonfacility payment rates—Medicare defines physician offices as a nonfacility setting—for telehealth services will stay the same as in-person settings through 2023.
- Physicians can continue to supervise residents virtually through 2023.

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Opioid treatment programs will permanently be able to provide counseling and therapy by phone.

The AMA advocates permanent changes to Medicare payment rules that are fair and equitable for virtual care, along with other changes to rules that apply to physicians treating Medicare or patients with private insurers. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services is expected to cover telehealth policy and payment when it issues the proposed Medicare physician payment schedule this summer.

The benefits of expanded telemedicine are clear. Join physicians who are advocating to permanently expand virtual care coverage.

The AMA Physician Innovation Network is hosting a virtual discussion on telehealth after the public health emergency. Physicians can pose questions or concerns and discuss best practices about the future of telehealth. A panel of experts is answering questions.