

AMA quick guide helps doctors boot up their telemedicine practice

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The AMA has compiled a guide to help physicians get telemedicine up and running so they can safely care for patients. The telemedicine quick guide outlines the first steps to get started and lays out key considerations to implementing telemedicine and explains policy, coding and payment.

Even if your practice didn't use telemedicine before, it may be an option now.

Federal government agencies temporarily relaxed certain federal privacy regulations during the COVID-19 crisis and expanded payment policies. For example, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) is letting physicians provide beneficiaries a wider range of health care services without having to visit a health care facility. This CMS fact sheet explains more.

Also, the Health and Human Services (HHS) Inspector General is waiving Medicare's cost-sharing requirements for COVID-19 treatment delivered via telehealth from a doctor's office or hospital emergency department.

Learn more with the AMA about the key changes made to telehealth guidelines to boost COVID-19 care.

Taking the first steps

Here are three key things the guide advises physicians to do first when implementing telehealth:

- Set up a team that can make telemedicine services implementation decisions quickly.
- Check with your malpractice insurance carrier to verify your policy covers care provided via telemedicine.
- Familiarize yourself with payment and policy guidelines specific to various telemedicine services.

Considering policy, codes, payment

Next, here are three questions to consider when it comes to telehealth policy, coding and payment:

- | Are you providing services according to your state laws and regulations? Check with your state department of health or state medical association for the latest laws and regulations related to telemedicine services, as many governors have relaxed existing expectations during the pandemic.
- | Is your license valid to provide telehealth to patients in state? What about out of state? If your license is held in the state where the patient is located, there are no additional requirements. If your license is not from the state where the patient is located, CMS has temporarily waived requirements that would have required you to have a license in the state where the patient is located. Medicaid waivers must be requested by the individual state that wants to use them.
- | What are common Current Procedural Terminology (CPT®) codes and Medicare coverage for telemedicine services? The guide has a quick list of codes and their descriptions for coding guidance purposes.

Establishing a vendor, workflow

Finally, these are some of the items the guide suggests you consider when establishing telehealth.

Vendor evaluation, selection and contracting. Check with your existing electronic health record vendor to see if a telehealth functionality can be turned on. Ask your state medical association for guidance on vendor evaluation, selection and contracting. Understand who has access to and owns data generated during a patient visit and know the pricing structure. For example, is there a monthly flat rate or are you charged per call or visit?

Workflow and patient care. Determine protocols for when—or if—a telehealth visit is appropriate and train everyone in the office on those protocols. Determine when telehealth visits will be available on the schedule. Set up space to accommodate telehealth visits, one that is quiet and allows you to have clear communication with patients. Let your patients know about the new service. Get advanced consent from patients for these visits and properly document visits.

More resources

The AMA, along with the Physicians Foundation, Florida Medical Association, Massachusetts Medical Society and Texas Medical Association, have launched the Telehealth Initiative to help physicians redesign their practices to provide telehealth services.

The initiative is providing free, online access to resources do encourage all physicians to consider telehealth during this crisis. Physicians also can complete the free online AMA STEPS Forward™ “Telemedicine” module that is offered via the AMA Ed Hub™.

Learn more from an outstanding panel of experts participating in the AMA Physician Innovation Network discussion on telemedicine amid COVID-19.

The AMA has developed a COVID-19 resource center as well as a physician’s guide to COVID-19 to give doctors a comprehensive place to find the latest resources and updates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization.

The AMA’s COVID-19 FAQ will help physicians address patient concerns and offers advice on key issues such as how to optimize personal protective equipment supply.