COVID-19: National Physician Town hall questions on telehealth

On April 9, 2020, a panel of AMA leaders took to YouTube for a live town hall to shed light on the most pressing issues facing physicians during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Find answers to physicians’ most pressing questions on telehealth, compiled from your queries.

How has CMS changed or relaxed regulations to enable physicians to utilize telehealth more effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In general, regulations have been given flexibility to allow physicians to provide care via telehealth or telemedicine services. For the duration of the coronavirus emergency:

- Medicare will cover any telehealth service provided to beneficiaries anywhere in the US at the same rate as in-person office visits
- Physicians can now provide telehealth services to either new or established patients
- CMS maintains a full list of telehealth services covered under the Medicare Physician Fee Schedule

Read the AMA’s full breakdown of CMS payment policies and regulatory flexibilities.

What is the AMA doing to secure payment parity for telephonic visits to treat older patients or patients in rural areas who don’t have access to reliable internet or audiovisual technologies?

The AMA, along with the American College of Physicians and other physician organizations, successfully urged CMS Administrator Verma to take action to:
Provide payment parity, at least temporarily, between in-person, audio-visual and telephone evaluation and management visits
Instruct MACs to reimburse telephone E/M claims that were previously rejected

At the state level, the AMA is urging governors, insurance regulators and legislators to temporarily include audio only communications in the definition of telehealth and to ensure telehealth visits are paid for at the same rate as in-person visits. Learn more about AMA COVID-19 state level policy guidance.

Have any new CPT codes been developed for telehealth?

The only new CPT codes that have been developed for the COVID-19 pandemic are around testing, but the AMA does offer detailed guidance (PDF) on how to use existing codes for your practice’s expanded telehealth offerings in the quick guide to telemedicine in practice.

Do relaxed telehealth guidelines include license reciprocity that would enable physicians to see patients across state lines?

Physician licensure is determined at the state level, in response to COVID-19, the AMA supports state efforts to temporarily allow physicians licensed in good standing to practice across state lines. To date, about half the states temporarily allow license reciprocity and about half the states have created an expedited process for out-of-state physicians to register or receive a temporary license. These measures will expire at the end of the public health emergency.

During the COVID-19 pandemic CMS has granted individual states the ability to waive in-state licensure requirements for Medicare patients.

The Federation of State Medical Boards is tracking which states are offering license reciprocity. View the current chart (PDF).