

5 huge ways the pandemic has changed telemedicine

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With the arrival of COVID-19 and stay-at-home orders instituted across the country, physicians turned to telemedicine as a way to remain engaged with their patients. This form of real-time, audio-video communication allows physicians and patients to connect from different locations existed prior to the pandemic, but certain restrictions limited widespread usage.

Because of the coronavirus and temporary waivers on Medicare limitations, though, the usage numbers skyrocketed. A McKinsey & Co. report estimated that physicians saw between 50 and 175 times more patients via telehealth than they did prior to the pandemic.

As practices continue to focus on providing telehealth opportunities to their patients, the AMA has updated its telemedicine STEPS Forward™ module to reflect changes implemented during the pandemic. STEPS Forward™ is a series of interactive and engaging educational modules created by physicians to help address and potentially resolve common practice challenges.

Learn how the AMA is advancing telemedicine during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The changes that made telemedicine's rise possible

The module highlights five key changes that were made by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) that made telehealth opportunities so accessible during the current pandemic. Those changes were:

- Medicare will pay physicians the same rate for telehealth services as they do for in-person visits for all diagnoses, not just those related to COVID-19, throughout the national public health emergency.
- Patients can be in their home, or in any other setting, to receive telehealth services.
- Patients do not need to have an existing relationship with the physician who is providing telehealth assistance.
- Physicians are allowed to waive or reduce cost-sharing for telehealth visits.

Physicians who are licensed in one state are allowed to see a patient in a different state.

Discover why so many patients still can't connect to doctors via telehealth.

Steps to adopt telemedicine in your practice

The updates build upon the original module, which highlights key steps to successfully implementing telemedicine in your practice.

Once you have an understanding about the laws and regulations related to telehealth, the next step is to determine a service model that works best for you and your practice. There are a host of service models available through telehealth, including, but not limited to:

- Direct care for your existing patients with face-to-face videoconferencing.
- Acting as a connector with other physicians who offer store-and-forward consultation applications, meaning that medical data or images are captured and then forwarded to a separate specialist who at a later time reviews it and provides feedback.
- Leveraging remote monitoring tools to help manage chronic illnesses
- Participating as a consultant to physicians or other practitioners.

From there, you need to identify which technical applications and assistance you will need in order to successfully implement telehealth. Privacy should be the first word that comes to mind when thinking about this.

It is important to carefully select technologies to comply with HIPAA, the module notes. Privacy relates to more obvious aspects like appropriate informed consent and data encryption, but it also includes issues like finding a secure room that prevents any potential unauthorized access.

Lastly, in order to implement telehealth in your practice, you need to understand appropriate guidelines to initiate a telemedicine service model. This includes following appropriate specialty clinical practice guidelines as set out by medical specialty societies or state medical associations, following technical guidelines and ensuring appropriate sustainability models to support the types of telehealth services being offered.

The AMA has developed a Telehealth Implementation Playbook that is designed to support efficient, successful implementation of telemedicine so that physicians, care teams, patients and the broader community can experience the benefits of telehealth in practice. Learn more about protecting cybersecurity while using telehealth in this document, "Working from home during COVID-19 pandemic," produced by the AMA and the American Hospital Association.