Senior patients happy with telehealth and want it as care option

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Most patients 65 or older prefer in-person care, but the majority tell researchers that they were satisfied with the care they received via telehealth and they want it to continue to be an option.

“Participants reported being satisfied with the convenience of telemedicine, the ability to connect, the effort made to help them understand their health issues, the quality of the video, the privacy and the duration of the visit,” says the study published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society.

The typical patient grade for telemedicine was a six on a seven-point scale. Respondents said they favored telemedicine in bad weather or during pandemics, or when they were not feeling well or had restricted mobility. They also favored it when they already knew the physician well or had a good relationship with the doctor.

Overall, a plurality of patients said their virtual visit was the same or better than a traditional visit. The study also showed that patients 75 or older had similar perceptions of telemedicine as the seniors between 65 and 74, even though those 75 and up were significantly less confident about using computers or cellphones for video visits, says the study, written by a team of researchers from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.

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 study, conducted between April 2020 and June 2021, included English-speaking, cognitively intact adults 65 or older who had a phone-only or video telemedicine visit with their primary care
physician in a large health system.

“Despite preferences for in-person care, many participants envisioned utilizing a hybrid of telemedicine and in-person care in the future. Participants suggested that telemedicine may be useful for follow-up appointments and straightforward issues,” the study’s authors wrote.

Telehealth is fundamental to care—now the Senate must act like it and pass the “Advancing Telehealth Beyond COVID-19 Act.” Lawmakers also should seek a permanent extension that includes provisions to:

- Lift limitations on the locations of patients and physicians or other clinicians.
- Remove in-person requirements for telemental health.
- Ensure continued access to clinically appropriate controlled substances without in-person requirements.
- Increase access to telehealth services in the commercial market.

There were other notable findings from the study in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society.

Audio-only visits are critical

While seniors say they prefer video visits, 47% of older adults experienced telemedicine only through phone visits. Consequently, taking away this option will reduce access to care for America’s older patients, the study concluded.

“Not everyone over 65 has an iPhone or computer and technological savvy to access a telemedicine visit,” one patient wrote.

Tech a challenge for seniors

Among those 65 or older who were scheduled to have a video visit with their primary care physician, 27% reported that they had to convert to a phone-only visit because of technical difficulties.

That’s higher than the 10% who had to do that in a study that looked at patients of all ages. Older adults said they and their doctors need more training on how to use technology and they recommended that a health system choose one telemedicine platform and standardize the process.

According to an October National Center for Health Statistics data brief, in 2021, 37% of adults had used telemedicine in the prior year. Telehealth use rose with age, with 43.3% of patients 65 or older had used telemedicine, compared with 29.4% of patients 18–29 years old.