

## **The Expansion of Telehealth During A Pandemic**

In the past, telehealth was restricted by policies and geographic location. However, political leaders have been relying on telehealth to diminish the spread of the coronavirus. Medicare policies have been extremely flexible due to COVID-19 and the wellbeing of older beneficiaries.

The Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act dismisses geographic restrictions temporarily for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. This bill allows those who receive Medicare to do so from the safety of their homes with telehealth technologies. Before COVID-19, the patient and provider were required to live in the same state.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act eliminates further restrictions on telehealth. New patients are not required to have a preexisting relationship with a doctor to schedule a virtual appointment. Telehealth allows people to access providers via a webcam or audio call on a telephone.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services added leniency to Health Insurance Portability and Accountability (HIPAA) regulations. Many forms of technology can be used for providers to communicate with their patients during the pandemic, including Google Hangouts, Skype, Zoom, Facebook Messenger, and FaceTime. Insurance companies have temporarily waived co-pays during this unprecedented time.

Telehealth addresses the national medical shortage and frees up medical staff and supplies to be used on COVID-19 patients. More patients can be seen than in a physical office. In some cases, telehealth technologies are more affordable than traditional healthcare. Select health systems and hospitals in the U.S. for free or discounted telehealth options.

## **The New Norm**

Telehealth has been incorporated into routine medical care, thanks to the coronavirus. What was seldom heard of has become the norm. The convenience of telemedicine rests in patients' ability to receive treatment from the comfort of their own homes. As a result, doctors can provide quicker diagnoses and treatment, more efficient care, and reduced stress on behalf of the patient.

Many professionals with busy schedules may prefer telehealth over traditional wellness visits because of time and convenience. Telehealth can not replace in-person healthcare visits but serves as a great option for those with limited mobility and select situations.

A patient's medical history provides the majority of information doctors need to fix a problem, and the rest of the information comes from a physical exam. Doctors obtain ample information from simply listening to patients discuss what is wrong with them.

Citizens in rural areas are located far away from good healthcare, and telehealth eliminates the issue of distance. Most initial visits would suffice a telehealth visit and patients could come to the office for follow-up appointments. Doctors want to see their patients for an in-person visit at least once a year.

## **Future of Telehealth**

Geographic restraints have been placed on telehealth solutions due to cost ramifications. This concern has fallen to the wayside, as disease control and prevention are the main focus during COVID-19. Whether the government will permit leniency in HIPA policies in the future is unknown, depending on how long COVID-19 lasts and how dangerous the situation is.

The Telehealth Innovation and Improvement Act would require the exceptions to Medicare policies to be extended forever. If this bill is passed, the CMS Innovation Center will be required to conduct tests on the general use of telehealth. CMS will be required to reimburse for telehealth services that save money and improve quality.

COVID-19 has driven the need for telehealth services, which may force lawmakers to take quick action and pass additional legislation. If telehealth becomes the new normal, patients with chronic illnesses could wear sensors to remotely monitor significant health changes.