

Lifestyle With Dr. Z



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Telemedicine

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we obtain healthcare. During the height of the pandemic, up to 50% or more of all visits were provided through telehealth. After the pandemic, telehealth usage stayed at much higher rates — up from 0.1% in 2019 to about 17% of all patient visits in 2023. As a result, healthcare companies are working to craft a more deliberate, strategic approach to virtual care.

What is telemedicine?

Telemedicine refers to the provision of remote clinical services, via real-time two-way communication between the patient and the healthcare provider, using electronic audio and visual means.

What makes it so easy?

In the past, telemedicine was just a phone call, where the patient seeks the doctor's advice that does not require any visual care. Now, with the advent of "face time," doctors and patients can see each other.

It is also cost-effective, compared to the process of waiting to see the doctor in their office.

Telemedicine can also help take care of urgent calls after a doctor's office is closed. It is of immense value in the follow-up of patients with diseases such as diabetes, high cholesterol, or high blood pressure. Providers can help with dosage changes, lifestyle advice, med refills, or even just access to group support. Further, telemedicine can help address lab results, oxygen levels, or blood pressure reviews.



What other things are driving the trend in telehealth?

1. Healthcare workforce shortage

The continuing, massive healthcare workforce shortage has health systems looking for ways to fill gaps in care, such as in rural or underserved areas. Telehealth is a way to expand the reach to more patients where doctors are scarce, such as psychiatry, oncology and urology.

2. Labor cost savings

Second is an effort to bring labor costs under control. The workforce shortage, combined with unprecedented healthcare demands during the pandemic, has driven staffing costs much higher. One study found that telehealth reduced costs to the health system by more than 50%.

3. Increased access to care

Third is the ability to provide care to populations that don't have easy access to certain specialties due either to their geographic location or a specialty physician shortage, a challenge telehealth is uniquely positioned to help

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address. Some organizations are using virtual care to fill smaller care gaps, enabling them to deploy specialty consults as needed rather than hiring full-time providers when there's only part-time demand.

4. Reduced provider burnout

And finally, hospital systems hope telehealth care relieves some of the pressure on their physicians, helping tackle the problem of burnout. Giving physicians the chance to care for patients from their own home or other setting helps them maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Virtual care experts

One change is certain: In the next five years, more physicians will be experts at virtual care. Many docs are learning to perfect their “web-side manner” and feel at ease seeing patients virtually. Similarly, hospitals will have full-time telehealth specialists and chief virtual care officers.

Artificial intelligence and virtual care

The biggest buzzword is artificial intelligence, and healthcare is embracing the AI wave. Automation or artificial intelligence may be a way to augment telehealth. For example, AI chatbots could serve as the first point of contact for patients as they engage with a health system, steering patients to the right care faster.

What are the risks of telehealth?

Telehealth is not face-to-face care. Physical exams are often still needed. Docs still need to listen to the heart, lungs, and check reflexes.

Perhaps a bigger challenge in telehealth is to create the right patient experience — from the first touchpoint through care delivery and follow-up — so patients will want to engage with telehealth. The “art of medicine” is on

display, and people won't trust their doctor if they don't have a good rapport with them.

One thing the pandemic did do right was highlight the usefulness of telemedicine. Although it had its bugs to work out in the beginning, telemedicine became a way for patients to access care safely through a secure video chat portal.

It has often been said, “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” Perhaps one real benefit from the Covid pandemic is the trend for better care that can be given remotely and paid for, remotely. After all, medicine is still a business, like most any other. We can improve health, save money, and increase access to care. Everyone wins.

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