Telemedicine augments patient care in ‘unexpected and fulfilling ways’

Telemedicine continues to come into its own as a key facet of health care — especially as we age.



Telehealth’s impact may be even more vital as we age, says Dr. Jason Tibbels, chief quality officer for the virtual health care company Teladoc Health.(Getty Images)

Like so many tech-driven delivery solutions over the past two years, telemedicine’s role as a stop-gap measure during the pandemic has changed how we think about health care. The result: More of us are swapping out the waiting room for the ease and convenience of a virtual house call via our phone, tablet or laptop.

"My mom, who is 67 and not tech savvy, did a couple of virtual visits for her sleep apnea during the pandemic," says Dr. Tiffany Berry, a family medicine physician. "She loves it. Now her first question is, 'Can we do this virtually?'"

The answer in most cases is yes, says Berry, who is also vice president of primary care for Baylor Scott & White Health.

Initially developed to provide underserved communities access to health care specialists, telemedicine continues to come into its own as the key clinical cog in the broader world of remote medical services known as telehealth.

Doctors can safely and thoroughly help patients manage various health concerns, from skin rashes and stomach problems to medication management, post-surgery checkups and illnesses like the flu. Telehealth tools also show promise in depression and anxiety treatment and specialized palliative care support.

Berry is most excited about telemedicine's potential to help manage hypertension, diabetes, and other time-consuming and costly chronic diseases for people who may not always get the ongoing care they need.

"Instead of taking five hours off of work, you can do a virtual visit from your vehicle, home, office or wherever is most convenient," Berry says. "You're able to do those visits and those touch bases more frequently."

Telehealth's impact may be even more vital as we age, says Dr. Jason Tibbels, chief quality officer for the virtual health care company Teladoc Health, which in the last 18 months alone has facilitated more than 20 million doctor visits through its website and mobile app.

Consider these stats:

- Roughly 70% of older adults live with at least two chronic conditions.
- 30% of 65-year-old people without hypertension will develop it by age 70.
- 25% of Americans 65 and older live with diabetes.

"Recognizing that these conditions do not live in a silo and are often interconnected with other health concerns, like mental health, whole-person virtual care is perfectly equipped to help with this population," says Tibbels, who is also a family medicine practitioner in Decatur.

UT Southwestern Medical Center's Dr. Jessica Voit has seen telemedicine augment patient care in "unexpected and fulfilling ways." During virtual visits, the geriatric internal medicine specialist has been introduced to patients' family members, pets and hobbies.

"You're able to really get a glimpse of people and their home life and what matters to them," Voit says. "And, likewise, you might also see potential challenges and barriers that might be fall hazards at home. I might not have brought that up in clinic, but I can bring up those hazards because I see it on the video."

Technology advancements will continue to refine the quality and reliability of the telehealth experience. Until then, it is essential to understand the drawbacks of telemedicine. Among them are a lack of access to reliable internet services, the risk of a disconnect in care, and an ongoing need to protect patient privacy and data. Most insurance providers currently cover at least some telehealth services, but it's critical to understand the costs and out-of-pocket fees associated with your appointment.

Also, telemedicine can't assess everything. Nothing replaces an in-person exam, particularly if you need imaging or a more hands-on approach for a serious or emergent problem, such as shortness of breath.

"Anything that requires someone to touch it, to feel it or to listen to it is a good way to think about the need for a physical exam," Berry says.

(Getty Images)

Preparing for your virtual appointment

Making the most of your telemedicine visit is still all about connection — in more ways than one. A little planning can help your virtual visit go off without a technical hitch.

Treat your telemedicine visit like an in-person visit

Sign on early to fill out electronic forms, complete a symptom checker or submit helpful information related to your appointment, such as a blood pressure log. If needed, grab a trusted family member or friend to help you set up for the virtual visit, or to sit in to provide additional information, repeat questions or take notes.

Set the scene

Telemedicine works best when your doctor can clearly see and hear you. Find a quiet, distraction-free spot that is well-lit and gives you privacy.

Charge your device and test your internet, audio and visual connections before your appointment. Close out any opened apps or programs that could distract you, or disrupt and slow down your visit.

"Inevitably, a camera doesn't work, or a computer decides it has to install updates and reboot, so give yourself plenty of time, so there's no stress on the technology side," Voit says.

Also, keep a list of current medications and any vital stats your doctor may seek, like your weight, temperature or blood pressure. Write down your symptoms, questions and concerns to share with your physician, and keep that pen and paper handy to take notes during the appointment.

During the visit

Wear comfortable clothing and be ready to listen and partner with your physician, who may ask to see a part of your body or show you how to conduct a self-exam to help with any diagnosis. Don’t hesitate to ask questions or clarify anything about your treatment plan or follow-up.

And, just like an in-office visit, there may be times when you must practice patience if your appointment doesn’t start on time.

“If your doctor doesn’t log in right away, I wouldn’t worry,” Voit says. “You can always reach out to the clinic if it’s been an excessively long period of time, but I always like to remind my patients that, just like an in-person clinic, telehealth clinics sometimes can run behind.”