

**Building a More Connected Patient Experience**  
**The Telehealth Journey Continues**  
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For most of us – healthcare professionals, insurers, administrators, and patients alike – the pandemic turned a gradually evolving focus on telehealth and telemedicine in recent years into a lifeboat for patient care. As much of the nation was in lockdown mode, ongoing patient care needs required a different paradigm for doctor/patient contact. Enter the onscreen, online checkup or check-in. And for all its technical challenges, telehealth became the widely used and accepted vehicle for non-COVID 19 medical appointments.

**A Pattern of Internet-Driven Patient Experience Emerges**

When the internet was first introduced, the patient mindset transformed from a “Doctor, heal me!” relationship to one of becoming an informed and, therein, empowered patient. Suddenly, research that was formerly only available within the scientific community was now there for the taking...on one’s home computer screen. As personal, mobile devices entered the scene, the average SMART phone user was quickly taking charge of their own medical knowledge and electronic medical records, becoming an engaged and informed influencer regarding their own health and the health of others in their network. Technology was creating a new doctor/patient and community experience.

**Report Card on the Pandemic-Accelerated Role of Telehealth**

While the availability of telemedicine appointments was critical amid the pandemic to allowing patient follow-up and continuity of care, it was also an opportunity to learn the advantages and challenges of such virtual appointments. A Health Monitor Network study of telehealth usage in 2020 revealed the following:

- The greatest frustrations with telemedicine appointments cited by HCPs were technology issues and the limitations they imposed on examining and bonding with the patient, as well as follow-up appointment logistics and the sharing of electronic health records across platforms.
- Technological challenges also were blamed for doubling the time of a 10–15-minute scheduled appointment, meaning some medical practices would see on average six fewer patients each day. This reduction in patient volume equaled a significant reduction in office revenue, which translated to one less staff person that could be supported or maintained.
- The early pandemic peak of nearly half of all doctor’s office visits taking place virtually via telemedicine, and many patients choosing to forego follow-up visits entirely, has dropped more than 50% to approximately one-fifth of patient visits happening virtually

as offices began re-opening and COVID-related patient safety concerns amid prevalent mask-wearing and social distancing have eased considerably.

### **Virtual First Appointments**

What healthcare professionals, health plan administrators and insurers have come to realize following the accelerated and widespread use of telehealth appointments during the pandemic is that telehealth is far better suited to less complicated types of medical visits, i.e., a patient check-in, a lab results follow-up, or a relationship build. The more complex visits – a first exam, a potential change in therapy, a specialist evaluation – suggest the heightened value of an in-person appointment. Health plan administrators have developed, and health insurers have endorsed, Virtual First appointments. A Virtual First appointment is an ideal use of telehealth to essentially conduct an introductory screening of a referred patient, which would then be followed by an in-person first exam if warranted.

### **A Future of Self-Managed Patient Care Unfolds**

Telehealth is changing the way we think and act regarding the patient/physician connection. Technology and adaptability will continue to improve our ability to access and share information in real time, as patients, physicians, healthcare professionals, and plan administrators. And as a result, the healthcare ecosystem will be forced to collectively develop a more thoughtful, compassionate, and relevant financial and reimbursement model for patients and physicians alike.

But perhaps of greatest importance, beyond operational efficiencies and clinical teams working together as one, is that we are rapidly transforming into a much more connected patient experience. Patients are gaining control not only of their health and lifestyle choices, but of their electronic health record and personal health management. They will be more involved, which in turn will lead to expecting more and demanding more of themselves and their healthcare network, all of which will lead to better and healthier outcomes.

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