



American College of Gastroenterology
Making the Most of a Telehealth or Virtual Visit with Your Doctor:
Frequently Asked Questions from a Patient Perspective

Introduction

COVID-19 has accelerated the use of telehealth across the country, with many providers offering “virtual” visits to their patients. In addition to telehealth, you’ve probably heard the terms “telemedicine” and “virtual care.” You may wonder what the differences are among telehealth, telemedicine and virtual care—which are often used interchangeably and essentially contain some form of audio-visual communication between a doctor and patient as an alternative to an in-person office appointment. For the purposes of this FAQ, we will focus on the virtual or video visit—which is fast becoming an effective and preferred way to continue to provide patient care during the pandemic. Due to the ease of use, effectiveness and patient satisfaction, providers most likely will continue to offer virtual visits well beyond COVID-19.

Here’s What You Should Know

1. How do I find out if my provider offers virtual visits?

The best way to find out is to call your provider’s office and ask. Due to COVID-19, many practices are now offering virtual visits for their patients by video, so you can maintain social distancing while getting the care you need.

2. Do I need special equipment to have a virtual visit?

A computer with a camera and microphone can be used to conduct a video call with your provider. If you do not have a computer or an internet connection, you may be able to use your smartphone (an iPhone or Android device). With a smartphone, the process is usually quite simple and may involve responding to a text message or downloading a simple “app” in order to get started, much like any other app on your phone, such as Facebook or Twitter. If you are using a computer instead of your smartphone, your provider will typically give you instructions to go to a website and login. You may need to download software to meet with your provider, but in other cases this is not necessary. If you do not have a computer, smartphone, or internet connection, your provider may be able to talk with you over a simple telephone call. However, it is unclear whether providers will still be able to use telephone calls in place of full office visits beyond the pandemic.

3. What are some advantages of a virtual visit for patients?

One of the most important advantages is not having to travel to a provider’s office for an in-person visit. This can help patients avoid costs of travel, missed work time and arranging services such as childcare in order to attend an appointment. With a virtual visit, a patient can “see” their healthcare provider from a variety of locations, including the home, office and a number of other possible locations. Many patients find this option to be incredibly convenient.

In the setting of the COVID-19 pandemic, an important advantage of telehealth services is minimizing exposure to both patients and providers.

4. How can my provider take care of me if they can't see me in person and perform a physical examination?

Providers can often get much of the information they need to help make decisions about your health by talking to you, performing a limited exam by video and reviewing your medical records, including test results, medication records, etc. Although an in-person physical exam can be important, there is still information that your doctor can obtain with a virtual exam that may provide all the information that is needed. Most virtual visits are conducted via video so your provider may also get a general sense of any major health changes by seeing how you look and how you interact with them. In fact, there have been multiple scientific studies demonstrating that a telehealth visit may be just as good as an in-office visit for many types of health conditions. Some problems, however, may require an in-person visit, including an in-office physical exam, and your provider will let you know if they feel an in-person visit is preferred over a virtual visit.

5. Will my virtual visit cost me anything?

The best way for a patient to consider a virtual visit from an insurance standpoint is that it is quite similar to an in-office visit. Many types of insurance including Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance cover telehealth services. This is particularly true in the era of COVID-19 in which telehealth or virtual visits are being encouraged in order to facilitate social distancing and keep patients and providers safe. Similar to in-office visits, there may be a potential co-pay. Patients should check with their provider's office and their insurance carriers to ask about their healthcare coverage and any potential out-of-pocket expenses. In addition, if text messaging or Wi-Fi plans are used for the virtual visit, these associated costs may also be included.

6. What types of modalities are available to conduct telehealth services?

There are a number of different ways a provider can interact with a patient for a telehealth visit. In some cases, providers may use an audio-visual tool that already exists in the office electronic health record. To increase the ease of communication between providers and patients in the setting of COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an expansion of other types of modalities that can be used for telehealth interactions. Patients can find out what is available by contacting provider offices directly.

7. Are there any virtual services that are specific to GI patients?

A virtual care and support platform that focuses on gastrointestinal conditions is called [GI OnDEMAND](#). GI OnDEMAND gives patients the option to conduct virtual office visits if their gastroenterologist, registered dietitian, clinical psychologist or other care team provider is a member of GI OnDEMAND. However, any patient can have free access to GI OnDEMAND's educational and informational resources, including evidence-based health information on a variety of GI health topics, and the weekly Digestive Health Insights newsletter, whether their healthcare provider is a member of GI OnDEMAND or not. To access the educational resources

and support community, patients can request a special invitation to join directly from the GI OnDEMAND Patient Support Community.

8. How do I prepare for my virtual visit?

- Write down your questions for the doctor
- Make sure you are in a quiet, private place
- Adjust the lighting so your provider can see you by turning on overhead lights and blocking light from windows, which can lead to too much background light in the video
- Test equipment at least 10 minutes before your appointment time
- Set up your camera at eye level
- Know where to call for technical support or to report any problems that day
- Treat your virtual visit as you would an in-office appointment -- this includes discussing your symptoms, medications, family history of GI disorders and GI-related cancers, including colorectal cancer, and any other medical information you would like to discuss

9. What should I do after my virtual visit?

- Make sure prescription re-fills are sent
- Make sure you understand the next steps if your doctor ordered any lab tests
- Make sure to schedule any follow-up visits
- Review the after-visit summary, if one is provided

If you are unsure whether a virtual visit is right for you or your family member, please contact your provider. The information in this article is for informational purposes only and is not medical advice. You should always consult with your doctor if you have questions about your symptoms, treatment plans and your individual health concerns.

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