

AASLD, ACG, AGA, ASGE telehealth virtual physical exam tips

While Medicare has lifted the requirement for documentation of a physical exam for telehealth visits conducted during the COVID-19 public health emergency, it may still be necessary to perform a virtual physical exam for clinical care. In addition, some commercial payors still require a physical exam in order to bill for telehealth visits.

Fortunately, performing a comprehensive virtual physical exam is possible. Remember that there are 12 organ systems: constitutional (vital signs, general appearance); eyes; ears, nose and throat (ENT) and mouth; cardiovascular (CV); respiratory; gastrointestinal (GI); genitourinary; musculoskeletal; skin; neurologic; psychiatric; hematologic/lymphatic/immunologic. From a billing perspective for new patients, some payors may still require you to document two to seven organ systems for E/M level 3 (99203) and eight or more organ systems for E/M levels 4 (99204) and 5 (99205).

Sample comprehensive physical exam (9-12 organ systems) for a GI patient

Organ system	Example physical exam findings
Constitutional	Well appearing, no apparent distress.
Eyes	Conjunctiva clear without icterus, pallor, or injection.
ENT	Nose without external redness or drainage. Mouth with normal dentition; moist mucous membranes.
CV	No lower extremity peripheral edema or signs of cyanosis.
Respiratory	Breathing comfortably and speaking in full sentences without evident tachypnea or signs of respiratory distress.
GI	Abdomen non-distended and non-tender to self-palpation.
Skin	No visible rashes
Psychological	Appropriate affect. Intact thought and speech.
Neurological	Alert and oriented. Moving upper extremities appropriately.

Tips on how to perform a virtual physical exam:

Organ system	Example of virtual exam
Vitals	Vitals can be obtained by MD or MA. Pulse: Show the patient how to find their pulse on their wrist and ask them to count beats aloud while you time 15 seconds then multiply by 4. Breathing rate: Observe breathing rate over 15 seconds and multiplied by 4. Temperature: If your patient has a thermometer, have them take their temperature and tell you what it is. Be sure to document the device/method. BMI: If the patient has a scale, ask the patient their weight and height so you can calculate BMI. Constitutional: Record the patient's constitution (e.g., thin, obese)
Eyes/ENT	Ask the patient to move camera closer to eyes, nose, mouth, etc. as needed. If needed, ask to use an additional light source like a flashlight or move closer to a lamp to get a better view.
CV	Ask the patient to press on lower extremities to look for edema. Look for blue lips or facial pallor as signs of cyanosis. While patient is counting radial pulse, you can also get rough assessment of rhythm. Ask the patient to move the camera closer to their neck to allow examination of jugular veins (eg, distension).
Respiratory	Ask the patient to take a deep breath in and out to listen for wheezing/cough and assess inspiratory/expiratory ratio.
GI	The patient can ask an available family member to perform soft and deep palpation in different quadrants. Otherwise, you can ask the patient to perform self-palpation to assess tenderness and rebound. You can ask the patient to jump up and down to assess rebound/guarding.
Hematologic / Lymphatic	Show the patient how to feel for lymph nodes and have them assess for cervical/axillary lymphadenopathy. Can evaluate skin for ecchymosis and/or telangectasias.
Musculoskeletal	Ask patient to perform specific exercises to assess range of motion. Can also visualize joints to look for erythema and ask patient to comment on warmth or tenderness.
Skin	Ask the patient to move closer to the camera so you can observe any jaundice, rashes, or tattoos. If needed, ask to use an additional light source or stand closer to a lamp to get a better view.
Psychiatric	Observe presence or absence of anxiety or depression during telehealth visit.