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# local & state



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## Did Someone Call a Doctor?

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, medical providers worked to quickly establish a safer way to treat patients. The result was an explosion in telemedicine services that allowed patients to see a doctor without ever leaving home.

— By Leah Schwarting, Daily Sun



### WHAT IS TELEMEDICINE?

Telemedicine can take several forms. It includes real-time phone and video communication between patients and providers as well as remote monitoring of patients using tools that can collect and communicate data, such as blood pressure monitors.

### WHAT ARE COMMON USES FOR TELEHEALTH?

The pandemic led many providers to offer patients a telehealth option instead of an in-person visit. Providers can use telehealth to virtually help with tasks like managing chronic conditions, reviewing lab work and treating some acute conditions.

### HOW HAVE TELEHEALTH SERVICES EXPANDED IN RECENT YEARS?

Medicare expanded the benefit on a temporary and emergency basis in March, allowing for the payment of office, hospital and other visits provided via telehealth to patients at home. Providers, such as doctors, nurse practitioners, clinical psychologists and licensed clinical social workers, can offer telehealth to their patients.



he said. "I don't have to be at my home. I can be someplace else and access it."

The use of telemedicine was gradually expanding for years before the COVID-19 pandemic propelled it to the forefront of health care. Nowadays, patients can take advantage of telemedicine to communicate with providers in real time through video or phone conversations, receiving medical care without ever stepping into an office.

"The main advantage is the convenience for the patient," Dr. Jeff Lowenkron, chief medical officer for The Villages Health. "The visits for the

About a year ago, Dexston Reed opened FaceTime on his Mac. It was his first telemedicine experience. "I can be anywhere,"

Please See **TELEMEDICINE, C6**

Medical History Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: (No. & street) \_\_\_\_\_ S.S. # \_\_\_\_\_  
(city or town) \_\_\_\_\_ (state) \_\_\_\_\_ (zip code) \_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone: Home: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ Work: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ Cell Phone: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_  
Employer: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Work Address: (No. & street) \_\_\_\_\_ (city or town) \_\_\_\_\_ (state) \_\_\_\_\_ (zip code)  
In case of emergency, who should we contact? \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Medical History  
Diagnosis (or area we will be treating): \_\_\_\_\_  
Referring Doctor: \_\_\_\_\_  
Have you been treated by another Physician? \_\_\_\_\_

Insurance Section: We need your insurance card for verification and billing address info.  
Primary Insurance Company: \_\_\_\_\_ ID#: \_\_\_\_\_  
Subscriber: \_\_\_\_\_ Subscriber D.O.B.: \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship to subscriber: \_\_\_\_\_  
Secondary Insurance Company: \_\_\_\_\_ ID#: \_\_\_\_\_

## THEN & NOW

### A TIMELINE OF TELEMEDICINE

#### How Medical Visits Went Virtual

1920

Physicians in Norway use radio links to provide teleconsultations to crews on ships at sea.

1964

AT&T introduced a video phone called the Picturephone at the World's Fair. The device became commercially available in 1970 but did not catch on.

1970S

NASA works with other organizations for the Space Technology Applied to Rural Papago Health Care program testing technology to provide improved health care to a remote population in Arizona.

1993

The nonprofit American Telemedicine Association launches to accelerate industry adoption of telehealth.

1999

Medicare starts paying for some telehealth visits for patients in rural communities.

2020

As the COVID-19 pandemic forces people to social-distance in order to stop the spread, more and more medical providers begin offering telehealth services.

TODAY

The U.S. House of Representatives passes a bill in July to extend Medicare telehealth services to Dec. 31, 2024. The bill is now in the U.S. Senate's hands.

Compiled by  
Daily Sun staff









U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

## VA HEALTH SYSTEM INCREASES TELEHEALTH ACCESS FOR VETERANS SEEKING CARE, SERVICES

The North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System uses telehealth technologies to increase veterans' access to specialty care and services in VA clinics near them. With telehealth available, patients may not have to travel as far, according to the VA website. Instead, they can receive their medical care through video visits, remote health monitoring, as well as devices that gather health data. Last year, more than 2 million veterans received care through the VA's telehealth program. The VA also offers programs to connect veterans who only have limited internet access to telehealth options through methods like lending out internet-connected tablets. For more information, go to [telehealth.va.gov/](https://telehealth.va.gov/). (Staff Report)

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"Telehealth visits are used for both acute complaints and follow-up," Lowenkron said. "There is an ability to do things like simple wound checks, etc. and save the patient a trip to the office."

And sometimes, telehealth may be all that a doctor or medical office needs to make a diagnosis or determine a path forward.

"On a video call, you can get the physical information by looking at the patient," Lowenkron said. "How does the person look? Is the person nervous, agitated or distracted? That gives you insight."

Doctors can also use the patient's medical history to ask the right questions during an appointment.

However, those choosing the phone or computer to talk to their doctor has scaled back significantly. Only about 7% of TVH's primary care appointments are telehealth appointments. For specialty appointments, the number is only 3%.

The numbers are below national statistics compiled by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. An October 2021 poll revealed that 23% of adults surveyed reported having used telehealth services during the previous four weeks.

"When offered a choice, patients like to get out of the house and go to the office," Lowenkron said. "There is a comfort with going to the care centers and seeing people they know."

Telehealth also has its limitations. There are parts of the physical exam that are not possible with current technology, Lowenkron said. And, although there's a visible connection, touch often helps in the connection and healing process.

But, while telemedicine may not be as popular as it once was with TVH patients, it remains a part of their services so anyone who wants or needs it has the choice available.

Not every visit needs to be in person, but telemedicine won't necessarily be appropriate for every kind of need, Hampton said. Preferences and needs must be taken into consideration.

If it's possible to use telemedicine, that may be preferable and make more sense, particularly for people who have a long commute or transportation or mobility issues.

"It's good to try to meet people where they are," Hampton said.

Despite not having any problems with the Zoom appointment, Fenn, president of The Villages iPad Club, wouldn't choose to do it again. From a patient perspective, he thinks it's better to physically see a doctor.

"It (the Zoom appointment) did what I wanted to do, but I prefer the other one," Fenn said.

### The Future of Telemedicine

In March, the American Medical Association released a survey that revealed nearly 85% of doctors surveyed use telemedicine for their patients, and almost 70% reported they are motivated to continue using it in their practices.

"The use of telemedicine came about largely because of a necessity because of the pandemic, but this has helped us realize its utility regardless of the context," Hampton said. "It's very very useful for patients because of many different factors."

Congress also extended telehealth policies adopted during the pandemic earlier this year as part of an omnibus spending plan. Under these policies, Medicare patients can receive telehealth services regardless of where they live, and allows for audio-only telehealth services to continue to be provided to Medicare telehealth patients.

More recently, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to extend Medicare telehealth services to Dec. 31, 2024. The bill is awaiting a vote in the U.S. Senate.

"The COVID-19 public health emergency made plain that care via telehealth should be available to all Medicare patients, especially with their own physicians, regardless of where they live or how they access these services," said Dr. Jack Resneck Jr., AMA president, in a statement. "From continuity of care, broadened access to care, and removing geographic and originating-site restrictions, our hope is that the flexibilities afforded during the public health emergency will be made permanent."

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