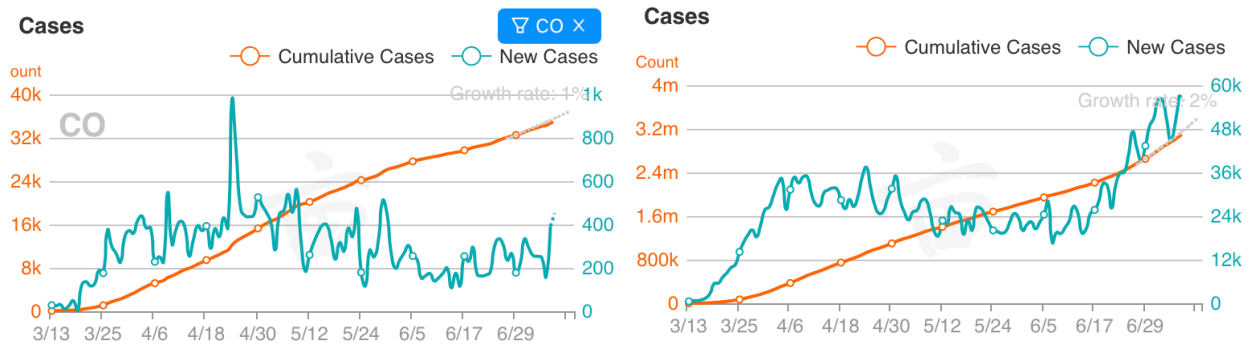


Telemedicine

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Telemedicine is the provision of health services via electronic information and telecommunication technologies. Specifically, Dave and I use multiple forms of technology to reach out to our patients. Before COVID-19, we readily called you with lab and test results, in response to your phone calls and questions, to check-in with you after an event and to follow-up on your care. Some of our patients utilize the portal to send us notes directly to our electronic health record and can respond to throughout the workday, while others send us emails that we tend to in the evenings. Most patient care visits, however, remained in person.

When COVID-19 arrived without invitation, we started conducting many “office visits” via the telephone, FaceTime or Zoom. Right now COVID-19 cases are relatively stable compared to the rest of the country. (see below, with Colorado on the left and the United States on the right) Many patients are taking advantage of this lull to get caught up on needed medical visits, screening test, dental visits and procedures.



We too have seen an increase in office visits and a decrease in telemedicine visits. We suspect however that this trend will oscillate as does the pandemic until it is over. As with any technology, there are advantages when it is used appropriately and disadvantages that are magnified when it is used inappropriately. Let's review some of the pros and cons of telemedicine.

Pros

- Convenience - Some patients have found telemedicine to be much more convenient. Those who have trouble taking time off from work to come in for appointments are able to save travel time by interacting with Dave and I via technology. Also, patients who are more homebound, by personal limitation or COVID mandate, have a way of accessing care.



- Decreases expense – Some of our patients do not drive and travel to our office by Lyft or Uber. Telemedicine can save patients' transportation expenses.
- Increased Engagement – Some patients report that they are more engaged in an online or telephone visit or conversation because they find it easier to ask questions. It is also a great means for quick checks in, like following up on an office visit.
- Timeliness – Telephone calls from Dave and I allow for prompt report of lab and test results. Other forms of technology also allow for a quick and convenient way for you to access your physicians. Studies have shown that just knowing you have good access to your doctors decreases depression, anxiety and stress.
- Reduces spread of illness – This is something that Dave and I have been very consciences about. We have made the appropriate changes to our office and are screening patients before they come into the office to reduce the spread of illness. If the number of cases in Colorado increase again, we may start doing more “office visits” over technology or home visit to reduce the spread of illness.
- Reduces cancellations – Our patients very infrequently cancel their appointments, and when they do, with good reason. The literature shows that the attendance rate for FaceTime and Zoom appointments is higher than for in-office visits. This makes sense as there are several fewer barriers to getting to your appointment – driving, driving time, traffic, parking, finding the office, etc.
- Limits unnecessary urgent and emergent care– Statistically, having telemedicine as an option decreases urgent care visits, emergency department visits and hospital admissions. Most notably hospital admissions are reduced by 38% when you are able to access your doctors by technology, including phone within 24 hours. Fortunately, this is something that the office has always provided even before COVID 19 and which has clearly benefitted our patients.
- Improves access in rural areas – For our rural patients, this improves access. It also improves access for patients who (sore subject) traveled a lot for business and will do so again.

Cons

- A barrier – On of the best things about medicine is the relationship you develop with your physicians. As they get to know you, they are better able to provide the care that will best serve you. Telemedicine creates a barrier between you and your doctor. Bottomline, care is better in person. However, some care is better than none and the occasional telemedicine visit should not affect your overall health.
- Another virtual encounter – Some patients are spending their work days glued to the computer. A trip to the doctor has been a welcome relief when we were all otherwise sheltering at home. A visit with your doctor on FaceTime or Zoom may feel like yet another work meeting.
- Requires technological devices – Some of us may take for granted the level of virtual connectivity that we have all relied on to maintain our social connections and mental health, by reducing our sense of isolation. However, about 15% of our patient community does not use email. Telemedicine presents a huge hurdle for patients without internet, reliable internet connectivity, technological devices, knowledge to download and use software, and savvy to navigate the system when the Zoom call doesn't connect without a hitch.
- Limited assessments – The biggest challenge for Dave and I is taking care of you without being able to do a physical exam. About 70-80% of the time the exam provides confirmatory information to the diagnoses and treatment plan that we are already considering. However, 20-30% of the time, the physical helps us identify the problem and devise a treatment plan. The three exams that can be difficult to do virtually are joint exams, lung exam, and ear exam. Occasionally the others need to be done in person as well. Also, labs and tests may not be possible to arrange remotely. It will be up to Dave and I to use our clinical judgement to decide when people absolutely need to be seen in person.
- Costs/billing issues – These *do not* affect you in our practice. I mention it only because some of the specialists you see may be running into tricky insurance reimbursement rules. I suspect that will fall mostly on the physicians but you may hear about it. If you receive an unexpected bill, please talk to your physician.
- We miss you – You all know that I have no trouble being the sappy one, but I am not alone. Dave missed seeing you around the office just as much. I just thought I would let you know. But ultimately, we want to keep you safe and will return to more telemedicine visits to keep you healthy if needed.



Telemedicine is a wonderful tool to have and I think it is a great supplement to traditional “in-office visits” for when unique circumstances arise:

- You have a quick question or request (phone, portal, email)
- We want to give you a quick update (phone, portal, email)

- We don't want to put you at risk of spreading or catching an illness (phone, FaceTime, Zoom)
- You aren't near Denver (phone, FaceTime, Zoom)
- You can't physically get to the office (phone, FaceTime, Zoom)
- The office is closed at night or on the weekends and you need to speak with a doctor urgently (phone)

Our office staff, Nancy and Kris who spend most of their time answering phones. They are happy to help make recommendations or to chat with Dave and I to see if an "in-office" visit would be safest and most appropriate or if telemedicine would be just as effective.