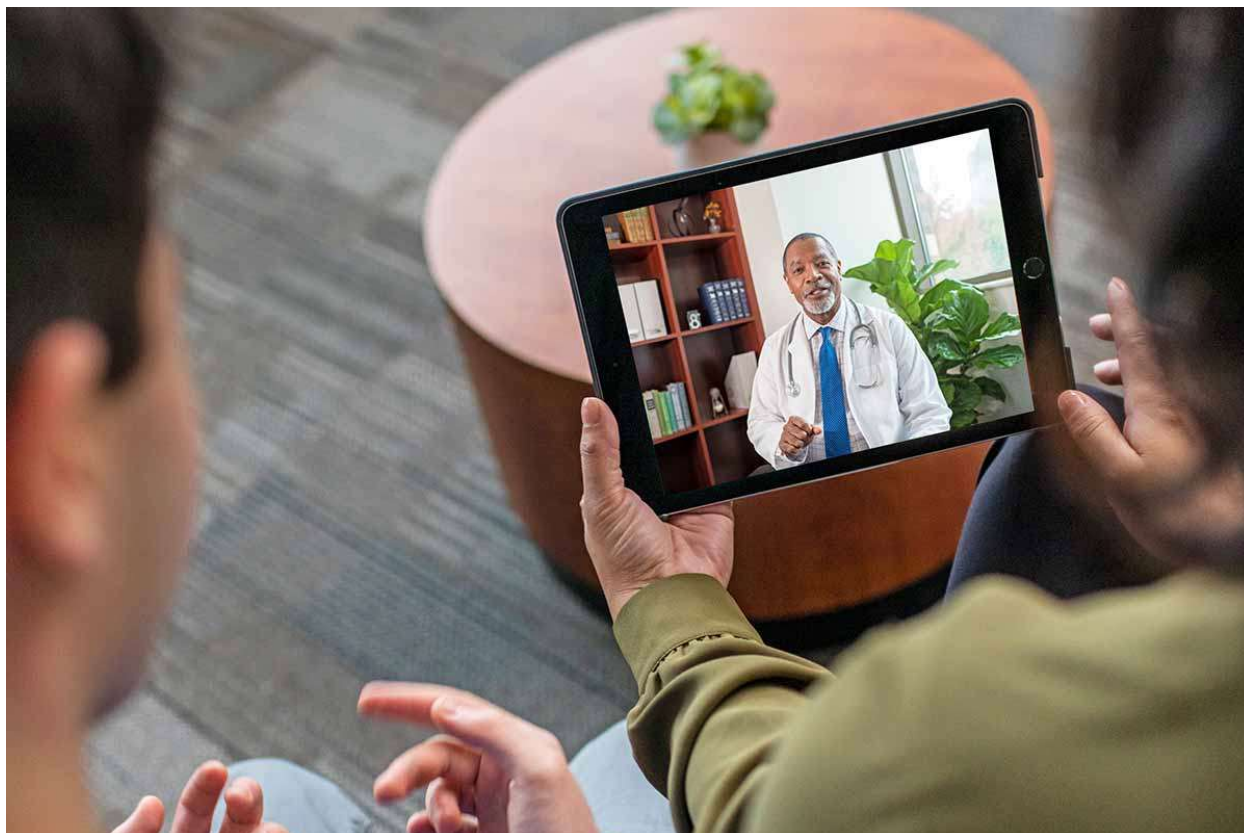




Virtual health care (you might also know it as telemedicine or telehealth) is when you talk to a doctor through a video chat on your smartphone or computer rather than driving to your doctor's office. Right now, this kind of virtual care makes up 13% to 17% of all outpatient visits.¹ It turns out people really like having quick access to doctors virtually. Here are 5 reasons why.

1. Virtual health care can make it easier to stay on top of your health

If you get regular checks on a chronic health condition like high blood pressure or type 2 diabetes, or if you need a quick touch-base after a change in your treatment plan, virtual care can be a quick, efficient way to get it done. It can even help you simply stay on top of visits with a primary care physician. "Primary care is so important," says Terresa Walker, director of strategic product development at UnitedHealthcare. "Partly because of the pandemic and partly because of busy schedules and limited doctor's office hours, many people have stopped seeking primary care — yet a primary care doctor is the one who helps you navigate the whole health ecosystem. That is key to a healthy society."

Walker notes that, for many people, virtual care can provide better access to primary care. That can help to alleviate the pain points of an overwhelming system of in-person care. "So instead of having to go to urgent care, you may instead have 2 relationships — your virtual primary care doctor and your in-person doctor," Walker says. "Those 2 doctors work together and create a

relationship. It's a way to enhance the overall health of our country by providing the greater access we all need."

2. Virtual health care lets you keep a low profile

With virtual care, people often feel more comfortable discussing things that seem highly personal — think sexually transmitted diseases or substance use disorders. Research also indicates virtual care works well for mental health. A study by the American Psychological Association¹ shows people are more likely to stick with their care if it is virtual.¹ "Virtual mental health care gets rid of the anxiety many people have around going to a clinic," Walker explains. "You may still feel shy, but some people find the virtual visit so much easier, so they get the care that maybe they wouldn't have sought out otherwise. They feel freer to talk about things they would not have in an office setting. And the virtual care option definitely helps alleviate some of that burden on an overwhelmed behavioral health system."

3. Virtual health care saves you time and lets you stay where you are

Virtual care may mean the difference between staying comfortable at home and rushing to the doctor's office only to wait in the lobby — especially if you're not feeling well to begin with.

In a time and cost analysis evaluation of patient experience published in *Sage Journals*, researchers found that the average time spent on an urgent care visit was 1 hour, 11 minutes. But without travel and waiting rooms to deal with, virtual care visits took less than 10 minutes.² "Imagine you're a working mom with 3 kids who has 30 minutes on her lunch break," Walker says. "Virtual care can give you the right care at the right time, in the amount of time you have."

Even with less time invested, you're still getting care. "Our clinicians and research both show that virtual visits work," Walker says. "It's certainly better than no clinical care at all. There are a lot of people who haven't gotten care since COVID happened, and some who are scared of doctors in general. Virtual visits help bridge that gap and make it much less scary. People often tend to talk more freely in a virtual visit than they would in a clinical setting, because they're in a more comfortable environment. Virtual clinicians can also be very creative in diagnosing issues, whether it's showing you where to press on your abdomen to see where you have pain or having you go up to the local pharmacy to get your blood pressure checked. If you truly need to see someone in person, that provider will let you know."

4. Virtual health care helps reduce the spread of infectious conditions

Virtual care keeps sick people from having to come into the office — and less exposure to germs helps everyone.

Research even suggests that, for infections, virtual doctors can get everything they need through video chat. According to a study from the International Journal of Infectious Diseases, among people who used virtual care for an upper respiratory infection, acute pharyngotonsillitis, acute sinusitis, urinary tract infection or acute diarrhea, 90% of them received the same care they would get in person.³

5. Virtual health care allows you to see doctors and specialists who are far away

If you live in a rural area, you may not have the same access to physicians that you would have if you lived in a big city. “Think about all the rural areas in our country,” Walker notes. “There are so many health care deserts. If you have to drive an hour to get to a doctor, that’s a huge barrier to getting the care you need. Now imagine if you have to see that doctor multiple times. Maybe 4 visits out of 5 can be handled virtually. We can’t magically make a provider in your area, but we can make it so you don’t have to drive that distance every single time.”

Virtual care can also be a great solution for people who travel often, or for students who spend months at a college out of state and then are home in the summer. “With virtual care, you can access physicians who are licensed in multiple states. If my health plan and network physician is in Florida, they won’t be able to help me if I’m in Minnesota,” Walker says. “But with virtual care, you can talk with a physician on that same care team who’s licensed in the state you’re in, and they’ll have access to all your medical records.”

Virtual medicine vs. in-person care: why we need both

Virtual health care isn’t for everyone. And it can’t solve everything. For instance, it isn’t the best option if you need something like a throat culture or if you suspect a concussion or a broken bone. But for many coughs, rashes and pains — even urinary tract infections or diarrhea — you can get access to care online. “The goal isn’t to switch people from in-person to virtual care,” Walker adds. “It’s helping people get the care they need in the way that works best for them, and helping people get access that they might not have. In that way, I think virtual care enhances the overall health of our country, providing that greater level of access we need. If we can get people the care they need, that’s what our job is.”

How to find your virtual care benefits

Depending on your benefit coverage, you may be able schedule a virtual visit with a local provider or have a virtual visit for primary care, therapy, specialty care or 24/7 with a national provider for urgent care or when your provider is not available. [Sign in to your health plan account](#) or call the number on your member ID card to check your benefits for virtual visit coverage.

6 steps to prepare for your virtual health care appointment

1. **Watch your email.** Your provider may send you emails or texts with details about your upcoming telehealth appointment and instructions to log on.
2. **Let your provider know what you need.** If you need assistive technology like a screen reader or closed captioning, or if you need a translator, let your provider know.
3. **Make lists.** List your current medications, any symptoms, questions and concerns you want to discuss, and any information your provider has asked you for, like your temperature and weight. Take notes about what your provider says during the appointment, too.
4. **Be honest.** Truthful answers about things like drinking, drug use, domestic violence, medication, supplements, etc., are all important in making sure you get the right treatment. (If you have concerns about privacy, let your provider know ahead of time or when your appointment starts.)
5. **Find a quiet space.** If your household is busy, this can be a challenge, but do what you can in advance to keep kids or pets occupied.
6. **Close apps you're not using.** This can help your internet connection and reduce distractions.