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## How to make the most of a telemedicine visit

9-12 minutes

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### Telemedicine: How to have an online visit with your doctor

*Video consults can help you get the care you need without leaving home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here's how to know whether an online visit is right for you.*

By Mayo Clinic Staff

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has changed the way people meet with friends, family members and co-workers. It's also changing the way people get health care. In all of these cases, technology creates meaningful connections.

Maybe you have a mobile device such as a smartphone or tablet. Or you might have a laptop or desktop computer. With the right device and a reliable internet connection, you may be able to see your doctor online from the convenience of your home, thanks to the growth in video-based telemedicine services.

Telemedicine visits can address a range of health needs, including:

- Urgent care, including evaluation of possible COVID-19 infection
- Express care for quick diagnosis of conditions such as sinus infections or rashes
- Primary care, including medication management
- Prenatal care
- Counseling
- Diabetes management
- Consultation with specialists

Most people report a positive experience with online visits. The convenience factor gets high marks. There's no need for a car trip or a babysitter. And you don't have to change out of your comfy clothes.

Many people also say the real-time consultation can be just as effective as an in-office visit. Plus, while social distancing is needed during the COVID-19 pandemic, video visits for medical care offer a way to access timely care without leaving home.

### It's all part of the telemedicine movement

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, video technology helped doctors connect with people in rural locations. More than half of U.S. hospitals and medical centers use telehealth in some way now. That rate is expected to grow substantially over time.

A quick definition check: Telehealth is an umbrella term that includes any health-related services using phone and video technology, including medical education and administration. Telemedicine refers to clinical services such as online doctor visits.

Technology allows medical experts from larger centers to review test results and consult on treatment plans with doctors in smaller communities or centers that may be far away. This allows doctors to treat people who wouldn't normally have access to this expert care.

Telecardiology — using telemedicine to treat people with heart disease — is one example. Clinical data and heart-imaging test results can be sent to specialists far away, so there's no need for travel. To treat people with stroke from a distance, specialists from major medical centers can use telestroke services to interpret imaging tests and recommend treatment plans quickly.

### Could an online visit with your health care provider work for you?

An online visit or phone consult can work well when you have questions about minor illnesses such as sore throat, rashes or minor sprains. It's also an effective way to check in about a new or ongoing health concern until you can meet in person.

Starting with an online visit for nonemergencies can help you and your doctor decide on the best next steps. Sometimes an online consult is all that is needed. But next steps might include a clinic visit for follow-up tests or a physical exam.

Some health issues require in-person care from the start. For abdominal pain, a broken bone or possible heart attack, you need an in-person evaluation with your doctor. You might also need lab tests or other tests and in some cases emergency care.

If you're considering an online visit, check with clinic staff to review your options. You'll need to make sure you have the necessary technology at home, for example, before your online appointment. And always seek emergency care when needed.

## **Are online or phone visits covered by insurance?**

Every health plan is different. Some plans cover video health visits and others cover both online and phone visits. Many are still working on expanding access to many forms of telemedicine. Call your insurance company if you have questions or if you're not sure whether these services are covered.

In the U.S., an emergency declaration issued during the [COVID-19](#) pandemic waived many telemedicine restrictions. So more people with Medicare and Medicaid can use these services now.

## **Are online doctor visits secure?**

Medical centers use strict privacy measures to protect people online. In fact, the same privacy rules apply to both virtual and in-person visits.

Security software keeps personal health information private. A process called encryption blocks access to video and screen-sharing activity. Passwords and invitation-only meetings add more layers of protection.

## **Do you need an appointment for a video visit with your doctor?**

Some companies and health systems offer online services for counseling or urgent care that don't require an appointment. These "on-demand" services might be available from your clinic or as part of your health plan. Or you might access them through a private company. After you set up an account, you wait for the first available doctor.

Outpatient health clinics, on the other hand, schedule video visits just like they do in-person visits. This might be the case with your health care provider. Check your clinic's patient information online or call your clinic to learn about your options and information you need for your appointment.

When it's time for your visit, you'll receive instructions to log in to the clinic's video visit system to get connected.

## **How to prepare for an online medical appointment**

Just like with an in-person visit with your health care team, you'll get more out of every minute if you plan ahead.

- Well before your medical appointment, follow the organization's instructions for downloading needed software.
- Check your camera and make sure your device has working speakers and a microphone or headset.
- If you're using a mobile device, such as a smartphone or tablet, find an area in your home with strong Wi-Fi or mobile data. And check that you have enough battery power before you start your appointment.
- Find a quiet space in your home where you won't be interrupted.
- Set your device's camera at eye level to make it easy for your doctor to see and talk with you.
- Make sure to let your doctor know if there's another person in the room during your appointment. It's OK to have someone there to help you remember the conversation.

As you do with any appointment, be ready to talk about the reason for your visit, including any new or changed symptoms. Also, have your list of medications and supplements handy.

After your telemedicine visit, recap what you heard by writing down key takeaways while the information is still fresh. And be sure to follow up as your doctor requests. That might mean another virtual appointment or an in-person visit for lab tests, imaging tests or a physical exam.

Always follow up with your doctor if anything changes, such as worsening symptoms, or if you have questions. Ask about the best way to reach him or her. Clinic email, patient online service options or online visits — these days there are many ways to keep in touch with your health care team.

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