


INSIGHTS FROM THE BDO CENTER FOR HEALTHCARE EXCELLENCE & INNOVATION AND BDO DIGITAL

Patients want it,  
providers are wary of it.

## WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH TELEHEALTH?





The COVID-19 pandemic caused healthcare organizations to adopt telehealth practically overnight. In January 2020, just [24% of U.S. healthcare organizations](#) had a virtual care program. That increased to about [80% of physicians](#) claiming to have used telehealth by the fall of 2020.

Initially during the pandemic, providers and patients relied on ad hoc communication channels in order to communicate and receive care. Now, as the pandemic continues, what's next for telehealth? Will patients still want it even after the pandemic wanes? Will payers still pay for it? And how can providers use it as an effective tool for patient care?

There's a lot of uncertainty around telehealth, but one thing we know is certain: telehealth will remain a consumer-sought access point for care for the foreseeable future. For providers, that means stepping up their telehealth game or risk being left in the dust.

### **PATIENT AND PROVIDER WANTS AND NEEDS**

Telehealth has acted as a lifeline during the pandemic, allowing patients to see their doctors from the comfort—and safety—of their own homes. When patients and providers were forced to rely on telehealth during the strictest lockdowns, they proved that the technology has wide applicability, particularly with regards to chronic condition management and behavioral health. Many behavioral health providers are now regularly relying on video conferencing for behavioral health sessions.

While patients and providers are now eager for face-to-face interaction and the added level of care that comes from an in-person visit, telehealth will continue to play a role in care delivery, especially for supplementing primary and urgent care. And it will likely remain the default for specialties like behavioral health.

Understanding the need to implement telehealth is not the issue for most providers. The question is *how* to implement and sustain it: Which technologies do you need? What's going on with regulation and payment? Should providers be offering more training for their clinicians?

Healthcare organizations are directing resources to address these challenges. According to BDO's [2021 Healthcare Digital Transformation Survey](#), 75% of healthcare organizations are currently investing in telehealth capabilities, compared to just 42% in 2019.

## FOR PROVIDERS, IT WON'T BE EASY

As telehealth becomes a part of the regular menu of care for healthcare organizations, providers must not only deploy the right technology, but also make sure clinicians are comfortable using telehealth, especially when it comes to interacting with patients. According to BDO's survey, 46% of clinicians aren't comfortable with telehealth technology.

Healthcare organizations must prioritize training clinicians on the telehealth platform they'll be using. They need to make sure clinicians and staff understand how to use all available capabilities to provide patient care, including scheduling consultations, sending prescriptions, using chat interfaces and more. Organizations must provide dedicated IT resources specifically for telehealth so clinicians have adequate support and can get questions answered quickly.

On the back end, providers need to ensure their organization's tech infrastructure is aligned with their telehealth needs. IT systems and networks should be up to date to support fast, high-quality connections and processing. In addition, careful integration of telehealth solutions into the organization's technology architecture is crucial to providing good digital experience for both care providers and patients. While patients and providers may have tolerated slow connections during the pandemic, as telehealth becomes the norm, they'll begin to raise their expectations.

As telehealth becomes an increasingly important component of the care toolbox, providers will need to ensure they're using the appropriate channels to protect patient privacy and data. Simply using a consumer-grade video conferencing solution to virtually meet with patients may not meet all privacy, information security and compliance requirements. According to our survey, just 38% of healthcare organizations say their telehealth platform currently provides secure, private and compliant communications channels, while only 36% say it provides compliant coding and reimbursement functions.

While HHS has already put out [rules](#) around how telehealth can be used in accordance with HIPAA laws, expect regulations to continue to develop. Providers can get ahead of regulatory trends by ensuring they have good data governance practices in place, are conforming to HIPAA regulations and are prioritizing patient privacy and data security.

Finally, 53% of healthcare executives surveyed say they have optimized telehealth workflows. For the other 47%, they'll need to develop processes that manage clinician time and workloads when it comes to office visits vs. virtual care. That could mean hiring additional support staff to manage patient messages, schedule telehealth visits or enter information into the electronic health record. Provider workloads must seamlessly integrate virtual and in-person interactions, with both activities contributing to expected productivity. Taking on more telehealth appointments *in addition to* a full day of office appointments will only lead to increased clinician stress and burn out. When implemented correctly, telehealth will improve care, lower costs and support clinicians.

## THE JURY'S STILL OUT ON PAYER POSITIONS

During the pandemic, payers including Medicare, Medicaid and major insurance companies agreed to reimburse for telehealth services. With this precedent, it's going to be difficult for payers to reverse course. However, payers may see the rise of telehealth as an opportunity to differentiate reimbursement rates between telehealth and office visits. Should both care delivery methods yield similar outcomes, it is likely that reimbursement will ultimately standardize at the lower telehealth rate. This is consistent with site neutral payment initiatives that have occurred in the past. Over time, this should encourage more patients and providers to use telehealth, reducing wait times and improving outcomes. Of course, providers, patients and payers must ensure that telehealth is only being used where there is no demonstrable benefit to in-person care.



## WHAT'S NEXT?

**Telehealth is not going away.** Many patients want it, and all providers will need to learn to use it—the sooner, the better. Healthcare organizations can't just rely on what telehealth capabilities they threw together during the pandemic. They need to intentionally invest in telehealth capabilities and programs, from clinician skills to regulatory compliance, and keep abreast of the changing landscape of telehealth implementation to stay competitive in the future.



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Still have questions?

Contact us for more telehealth insights and solutions.

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