

Kidney Patient Care: Your Guide to Using Telemedicine

What is telemedicine?

Telemedicine simply means having a medical appointment in another way—not in person.

You can have a telemedicine visit with your healthcare team by phone or by using virtual technology. Technology connects you with your healthcare team by using a:



It makes it possible for your doctors or other healthcare professionals, to have a medical visit with you no matter where you are.

Why are people talking about telemedicine now?

Because of Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19), the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) changed the rules on telemedicine. They made it easier for patients to get care in a new way—from home. This means that everyone, especially people at higher risk, can see their doctors and stay healthy. And it means less risk of getting, or spreading, the COVID-19 virus. Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurance will pay for many different types of telemedicine care. You can see doctors, nurse practitioners, psychologists, and licensed clinical social workers with telemedicine.

Telemedicine may also be called telehealth. There are slight differences in these two words, but they mean similar things. Telemedicine is when a healthcare worker gives medical care or education from a remote location. The technology used to deliver the medical service to patients is referred to as telehealth. In this guide, we will use the word telemedicine.



What are the benefits of using telemedicine?



It saves you time.

- No travel or parking is needed.
- No waiting in lines or waiting rooms.
- Less disruption to work or family schedules.



It helps keep you safe.

- Avoid being exposed to germs and viruses.

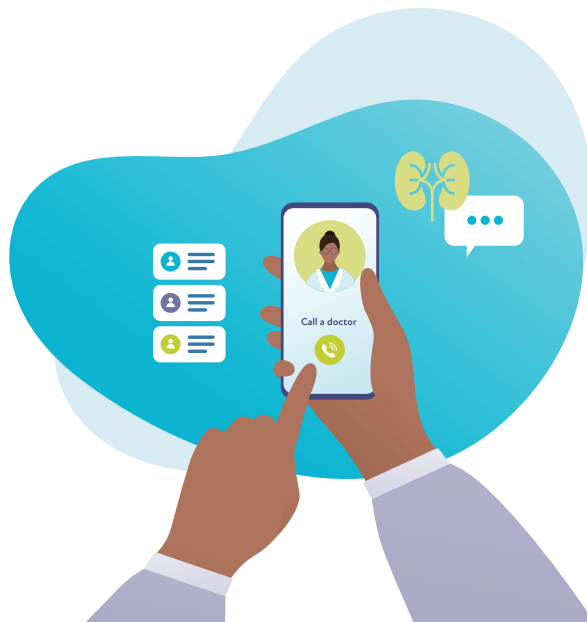


It helps you have easier access to routine and preventive care.

- This might be a follow-up with your diabetes doctor, or an appointment for medication management.
- Less worry about financial or transportation issues.

How might a kidney patient, like me, use telemedicine?

- Medication refills
- Dry weight checks
- Blood pressure follow-up
- Dialysis access check
- Nutrition and labs discussion
- Home dialysis monthly visit
- Kidney transplant follow-up
- Vision follow-up check
- And more



What are some other issues I can use telemedicine for?

- Skin infection or rash
- Pain or soreness
- Cold or seasonal flu
- Mental health issues
- Stomach issues
- Sore throat
- Allergies
- And more.

Remember:

***Telemedicine is not for true medical emergencies.
Call 911 for true medical emergencies.***

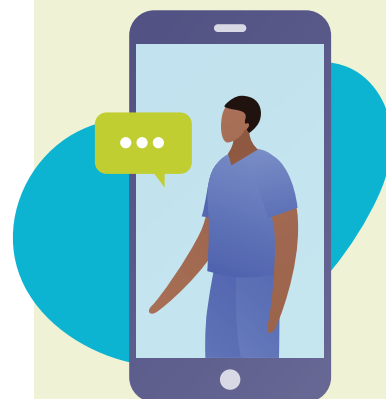
So, how can I start using telemedicine?

The good news is that your dialysis or transplant center may already be using telemedicine. They will help you! Here are some of the ways they may be using it.

- If you are on home dialysis you can have your exit site looked at by a doctor or nurse. They can review your treatment records and answer your questions. You may be able to talk to the rest of your team, too. This could be the registered dietitian to talk about nutrition, or the social worker to talk about how you are coping.
- If you have had a transplant, telemedicine lets your doctor look at surgery site, review medications, and check to see if you have any swelling. He or she can also answer your questions and talk about any concerns you have. If you are on the waitlist, they may be able to do all or most of your annual appointments by telemedicine.
- If you treat in-center, you still must go to the dialysis clinic for dialysis. However, some kidney doctors have started rounding using telemedicine by using a laptop. They can see you when on dialysis, review your labs, and chat with you as they usually do when they round.

Now that you are comfortable with telemedicine for your kidney care, how about other appointments?

- First, think about which type of appointment(s) you need. Remember telemedicine can be used for many routine or follow-up care. It can also be used to treat non-emergency health conditions.
 - Go back to *How might a kidney patient, like me, use telemedicine?* And, *What are some other issues I can use telemedicine for?* as examples.
- Then, contact the doctor's office to see if it offers telemedicine. Medicare currently pays for telemedicine services to treat COVID-19 and other medically reasonable purposes.
- Next, be sure to ask them what you need to do before your first telemedicine appointment. Some doctor's offices may require you to digitally sign a Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and other consent forms. You may also have to download an app for your phone or tablet. If so, download the app at least 24 hours before the visit.



What kind of technology do I need? How do I use it?

Do you have a cell phone with a camera? Or a tablet? A laptop with a camera? Then you already have most of the technology needed to start using telemedicine.

Telemedicine simply uses a cell phone or tablet and an app. You can usually use your laptop, too.

The apps can be downloaded to an Apple or Android device to connect you in real-time. Apps can also be downloaded on a personal computer using Google Chrome. Ask your doctor's office for instructions if you want to use your laptop.

Here are some commonly used apps:

- **Microsoft Teams** allows you to connect face-to-face with audio and video from almost anywhere.
- **FaceTime** supports video and audio calling between Apple devices. It lets people with iPhones, iPads, and Mac computers make easy video calls to one another.
- **Zoom** allows video and audio conferencing, webinars, live chats, screen-sharing, and more.
- **Skype** lets people make and receive free voice and video calls over the internet using a computer, web browser, or mobile phone.
- **pMD** is software that allows healthcare workers to connect with patients through video calls. It also allows healthcare workers to share patient information using a cell phone in a secure way.
- **Care Connect** is a phone-based service that give patients access to a nurse and education.



Remember:

You do not want to run out of power or lose your connection during your appointment. Make sure that your device is charged or plugged in. Turn off other programs that might disrupt the visit with notifications.

What if I am not comfortable with technology?

Trying something new can be tough. You can do it! Here are some ideas to help get you there:

- Ask a family member, close friend, or neighbor to try it out first. Things like FaceTime or Skype are easy to use and available to anyone. Try it a few of days before your scheduled doctor visit. This gives you practice and helps get you comfortable.
- Ask a family member or close friend to attend the telemedicine visit with you. Make sure it is someone you are comfortable sharing your personal medical issues.
- If you are on in-center hemodialysis, ask someone at your dialysis center—like the dialysis technician, social worker, nurse, or dietitian—to show you how to use the app or technology during your treatment time.



What about my data plan? What about using WiFi?

Use Wi-Fi if your cellular data plan is limited. If you don't have WiFi at home, ask a family member or friend to allow you to do the visit from their home. You can also ask your dialysis center to use a private room at the center. Many public libraries also have WiFi and private rooms that may work depending on the kind of appointment.

Remember:

Privacy is important. You may end up talking louder to make sure your doctor can hear you. So, make sure it is private from view, but also from other listening.

Preparing for Your Telemedicine Visit

Use this checklist to make sure you have everything you need to get ready for a telemedicine visit.

Choose a private location.

- Try not to take the call in your car or outside.

Check the lighting.

- You want to make sure your doctor can see you.
- It is best to have light in front of you, not behind you.

What technology do you need to have a successful visit?

- A smartphone or tablet, or a computer and web camera
- Reliable internet connection (WiFi or data plan)
- If your doctor's office uses an app for telemedicine visits, download it in advance.
- Pen and paper

Be prepared in case the call "drops," or it hangs up unexpectedly.

- Have the doctor's phone number available to call back.

If this is a new visit, be prepared to talk about your medical history.

Have documents ready.

- List of prescriptions, over-the-counter medications, and supplements
- Pharmacy phone number and address
- Primary doctor's name and contact information
- Insurance or credit card information

Write down questions to ask. Here are a few to start:

- What is the diagnosis?
- Will I need any medical tests?
- What can I do to get better?
- Do I need a prescription?
- What do I do if my symptoms continue?
- How can I access the information/treatment plan from today's appointment?
- Can I contact you if I have follow-up questions?
- For additional questions, download [The Doctor Will See You Now: Telemedicine Makes it Easy](#) located on the ESRD National Coordinating Center (NCC) website.

Ask about follow-up care.



Appointment Tracker (Optional)

It might be best to track your appointments and take notes on how they go. You can use a small notebook or app on your phone or try this tracker.

Doctor or Provider	Date	Reason for Appointment	Telemedicine or Office?	Notes
Diabetes Doctor	7/8/20	Follow-up on my blood sugars and insulin.	Telemedicine-Facetime	Accidentally hung up, but she called me back. Had my blood sugar records in front of me—maybe I could email them a picture next time? Nice to not have to sit in waiting room. Ask if my daughter can call in too next time.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Telehealth and Telemedicine: A Research Anthology of Law and Policy Resources. July 7, 2020. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/phlp/publications/topic/anthologies/anthologies-telehealth.html>. Accessed on July 13, 2020.



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