

What is Telehealth?

Telehealth is the use of technology to deliver health care services, exchange health information, or provide health education at a distance. Generally, telehealth may provide better access to the health care system for patients by increasing contact with providers outside the traditional office visit, adding needed expertise to a particular case, saving travel time and expense, and enabling providers to reach patients in their homes. Common telehealth applications include home monitoring by health care professionals; teleradiology, where test results are exchanged via the internet between health care facilities for diagnosis and treatment; and continuing medical education via presentations and webinars.

Telehealth can be divided into two categories: real-time communication and store-and-forward. Real-time communication telehealth may involve a patient and physician in a virtual exam room communicating through a live audio/video link or a specialist holding a teleconference with internists regarding new best care delivery practices. Store-and-forward telehealth refers to the transmission of digital clinical images, as in radiology or dermatology, for a diagnosis. While the term “telehealth” is still relatively new and not subject to one specific definition, it does not include all available health information technologies. Stand-alone electronic health record systems, or computerized decision support systems, for example, are not typically thought of as telehealth applications. However, all telehealth does by definition require the use of certain health information technology (IT).

Telehealth shows great potential for advancing preventative medicine and the treatment of chronic conditions, but its use may still be limited by the capacity of current technology, public and private reimbursement policies, and federal and state laws governing the privacy and security of health information. New forms and applications of telehealth are being tested every day in an effort to improve the quality of patient care while simultaneously reducing costs. In fact, many regions of the country are now served by Telehealth Resource Centers that provide best practices, sample documents, and information on successful (and some unsuccessful) telehealth programs.

Medicare and Medicaid both provide reimbursement for some telehealth services as long as the federal requirements for efficiency, economy and quality of care are met. Likewise, commercial insurance companies are increasingly covering telehealth services. In fact, nearly two dozen states have enacted legislation to require commercial insurance companies doing business in their states to cover such services. Projections for the growth of the telehealth market are optimistic, predicated upon the increasing demand for remote medical care.

For more information on telehealth, see our Myth Buster: <http://www.healthinfo.org/article/myth-buster-same-privacy-rules-apply-virtual-telehealth-consultations-person-visits>. For more information about health information technology, see: <http://www.healthinfo.org/topics/58>. Follow us on Twitter [@HealthInfoLaw](https://twitter.com/HealthInfoLaw).

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