

Resources for equity in telemedicine



The COVID-19 pandemic brought an unprecedented, almost immediate reliance on telemedicine. This new era has resulted in rapid innovation in telemedicine throughout the pandemic. It has also illuminated some challenges—and opportunities—in delivering equitable care.

For instance, in a study during the early phase of the pandemic, of 148,402 patients scheduled for primary and medical specialty ambulatory telemedicine visits at a large academic health system, patients who were older, female, Black, Latinx, and with a lower household income were less likely to use video for telemedicine. And those groups had fewer completed telemedicine visits.¹

One factor is a lack of access to technology:

more than **41%**

of Medicare patients lack access to a desktop or laptop computer with high-speed internet at home²

25 million

Americans lack access to internet at home. A higher proportion of Hispanic and Black Americans lack access compared to their white counterparts³

approximately **1 in 5**

Americans living in poverty lack access to the internet at home⁴

Centering equity in telemedicine advancements will help ensure technology improves healthcare accessibility and outcomes for all people.

1. Eberly LA, Kallan MJ, Julien HM, et al. Patient Characteristics Associated With Telemedicine Access for Primary and Specialty Ambulatory Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2020;3(12):e2031640. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.31640 <https://mhealthintelligence.com/news/telemedicine-care-disparities-draw-concern-for-health-equity>, 2. Roberts ET, Mehrotra A. Assessment of Disparities in Digital Access Among Medicare Beneficiaries and Implications for Telemedicine. *JAMA Intern Med*. 2020;180(10):1386–1389. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2020.2666 <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/2768771>, 3. Amin, K., Rae, M., Ramirez, G., & Cox, C. (2020, December 15). How might internet connectivity affect health care access? Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker. <https://www.healthsystemtracker.org/chart-collection/how-might-internet-connectivity-affect-health-care-access/#item-start>, 4. Amin, K., Rae, M., Ramirez, G., & Cox, C. (2020, December 15). How might internet connectivity affect health care access? Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker. <https://www.healthsystemtracker.org/chart-collection/how-might-internet-connectivity-affect-health-care-access/#item-start>



Here are some of the most important considerations to ensure all patients can access your telemedicine practice:

Anticipate and solve for patient challenges before a visit

- ✓ Ask patients before a telemedicine appointment if they need help accessing and using telemedicine software. At some hospitals, medical students are helping with these screening and assistance calls.
- ✓ Encourage patients to have a family member or friend available who can help them if technology issues arise.
- ✓ Use of lower-tech solutions, such as audio-only and asynchronous telemedicine appointments can be helpful for patients without access to high-speed broadband internet and a smartphone or laptop.⁵
- ✓ Internet access is now recognized as a “super social determinant of health”—and many patients from low- and middle-income households can get assistance with broadband internet from the federal government. You can direct patients to [fcc.gov](https://www.fcc.gov) to sign up.
- ✓ Older people may also experience barriers to telemedicine access, including hearing impairment, vision impairment, and lack of familiarity with technology. Before scheduling, consider screening older patients to assess whether they may need additional support during a telemedicine visit.

Create a successful telemedicine environment in the office

- ✓ Maintain a flexible workflow that focuses on continuous improvement in telemedicine so issues can be identified, problem-solved and addressed promptly.
- ✓ Provide additional staff time for trainings and assessment so every staff member is familiar with the standards and practices.
- ✓ Where possible, dedicated telemedicine support for staff members and patients can help minimize issues.
- ✓ Identify and catalog additional skills within your team, including:
 - Cultural competency
 - Staff who speak fluently in languages other than English
 - Community connections
 - Knowledge of and connection to underserved patient groups⁶

Communicate effectively with patients and other providers

- ✓ Provide information about telemedicine in accessible formats and different languages.
- ✓ Screen patient communications to ensure they are written at a reading level patients can understand.
- ✓ Measure patient satisfaction through post-visit surveys and assessments to ensure continuous improvement.

5. <https://www.telehealthequitycoalition.org/barriers-to-telehealth-adoption.html>, 6. <https://telehealth.hhs.gov/providers/increasing-telehealth-equity-and-access/>

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