



FOR SPECIALIST PRACTICES

Telehealth Consultations

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What is it and why use it?

WHAT IS TELEHEALTH?

Telehealth consultations provide a patient consultation through video or telephone instead of face-to-face. It involves the use of “information and communications technologies (ICTs) to deliver health services and transmit health information over both long and short distances”.¹ It uses the transmission of images, voice, and data between two or more sites using telecommunications to provide health services, such as clinical advice, consultation, education, and training services.² There are three main modalities of Telehealth:



Remote patient monitoring

Monitoring patient health and clinical information at a distance.



Store-and-forward

Transmission of images or information from one healthcare provider to another.



Telehealth consultations

Connection between a patient and healthcare provider/s through an audio or video-enabled device.³

Most practices in Australia that use telehealth tend to utilise telehealth consultations, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Video is preferred due to the added information it provides in consultations.

WHY USE TELEHEALTH CONSULTATIONS?

From a practice perspective, the business case for providing telehealth consultations is strong. Incorporating telehealth consultations into your practice can provide reduced overheads and cost savings.⁵ Contributing factors include reduced patient ‘no shows’ and higher patient attendance,⁶ shorter consultations that run to schedule freeing up time and resources,⁷ decreases in specialist travel and associated expenses,⁸ and high levels of patient satisfaction. Research suggests that patients can be equally, if not more satisfied, with telehealth consultations compared to face-to-face visits. This is contributed to by factors such as reduced travel, reduced stress, higher access to healthcare, and cost savings.^{9 10} Additionally, specialist practices can reach more patients and service a larger geographical area with fewer visits and offer a convenient service for patients.

WHAT IS A TELEHEALTH VIDEO CONSULTATION?

A telehealth video consultation is when a patient and eligible healthcare provider undertakes a consultation via video conferencing equipment, using hardware such as a webcam, microphone and speakers, headsets or headphones. The specialist and patient engage in the consultation remotely while being able to see and talk to each other. Depending on the arrangement, the patient may be at home using a mobile device, or in a care setting with another healthcare provider who is providing the equipment and supervision (e.g. a mobile trolley with telehealth capability).

WHAT IS A TELEHEALTH PHONE CONSULTATION?

A telehealth phone consultation is when a patient and eligible specialist undertake a consultation by telephone with only audio. Due to the lack of visual cues provided in this interaction, telehealth phone consultations are generally less preferred than video consultations. They can be appropriate for low-complexity cases and tasks such as sharing results that are normal or renewing existing prescriptions.

HOW DO I DECIDE TO USE TELEPHONE OR VIDEO CONSULTATIONS?

The addition of visual images through a video link adds value to any telehealth consultation and can improve both the quality and safety of the consult, particularly for complex consultations. Where technical issues arise, a patient is not comfortable with video connection, or it is not necessary to physically see the patient, telephone consultations can be used. See the table below for a comparison of the characteristics of each technology.



Video Telehealth



Telephone Telehealth

Visual and auditory cues	Only auditory cues
High patient satisfaction	High patient satisfaction
Lower medication errors	Convenient plan B for video issues
Higher diagnostic accuracy	Less safe than video Telehealth
Higher decision-making accuracy	May support shorter consultations
Patients may need to adjust initially	May be more comfortable for patients

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF TELEHEALTH CONSULTATIONS?



Patients

may benefit through:¹¹

- improved access to healthcare,
- reduced time waiting for specialist appointments,
- reduced travel, expense and time away from home,
- reduced waiting times supporting faster diagnosis and appropriate treatment,
- improved continuity and quality of care,
- local treatment from known health professionals, under specialist supervision,
- increased opportunity to contact a specialist between face-to-face consults, and
- convenience of accessing medical specialist without travelling from home or work.



Specialists

may benefit through:¹²

- reduced travel, expense and time away from home,¹³
- higher geographical patient reach due to less travel barriers,
- reduced patient 'no-shows',¹⁴
- real-time assistance with difficult cases and emergencies,
- assists allocation of consulting rooms within a practice with limited availability,
- opportunity for staff to work remotely, and
- professional development for clinicians, e.g. informal knowledge transfer, through increased collaboration, networking and case conferencing opportunities



Practice Managers

may benefit through:¹⁵

- service delivery growth opportunities,
- improved clinical workflows and increased practice efficiency, e.g. time savings,
- more cost-effective delivery of service through higher patient flow and time savings, and
- improved coordination of care and service integration.

IS A TELEHEALTH CONSULTATION SUITABLE FOR ALL SITUATIONS?

A telehealth consultation is not designed to replace all aspects of face-to-face care and it is at the discretion of healthcare providers to decide which form of telehealth will be used and for what purposes. The decision to use telehealth must consider clinical appropriateness and the individual's clinical presentation, circumstances (e.g., capacity to travel and participate in telehealth, plus family, work and cultural situation) and willingness to use digital technologies. Telehealth consultations may be considered for diagnosis, treatment, preventive and curative aspects of healthcare where the trade-off for the patient between attending face-to-face and staying at home favours the latter.

See the [Telehealth Consultations Implementation Guide](#) for detailed information regarding the suitability of telehealth. For optional extra reading, the Royal Australian College of Physicians' [Telehealth Guideline and Practical Tips](#) resource.

IS TELEHEALTH AS EFFECTIVE AS SOME ASPECTS OF FACE-TO-FACE CARE?

Some aspects of care through telehealth can be as effective as when care provided face-to-face. This includes care that is highly visual, need detailed history taking, or requires interpersonal communication, including:



Chronic disease management

of long-term physical, mental health and chronic fatigue conditions, including specifically in older people and cardiac rehabilitation patients.



Specialist consulting

for face-to-face consultations in clinical oncology, surgery,¹⁶ clinical genetics, and cardiology.¹⁷



Specialist diagnosis

across the areas of cardiology, dermatology, psychiatry, psycho-geriatrics, neurology and rheumatology.

However, without due consideration of the condition, technology, and personnel available, it is NOT recommended to use telehealth consultations with potentially serious, high-risk conditions requiring physical examination, when internal examination is required, when patients are not comfortable using telehealth consultations, and when the patient's ability to communicate is compromised.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF USING TELEHEALTH CONSULTATIONS AT MY PRACTICE?

The decision to provide or not provide telehealth consultations may be subject to medico-legal risks. Ensure that you seek advice from your Medical Indemnity Insurer. The risks for specialists using telehealth consultations may include:

- misdiagnosis,
- liability arising from inferior equipment,
- breaches to patient privacy and data security,
- reputational risk, and
- patient selection.

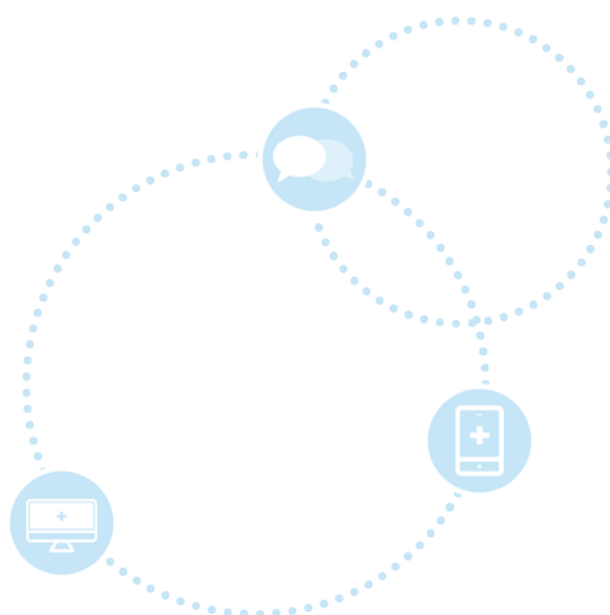
Following appropriate procedures and engaging in best practice (as required in a non-telehealth consultation) will reduce these risks. Ensure you complete the [Telehealth Consultations Learning Module](#) which provides advice from the Medical Board of Australia on keeping your practice safe.¹⁸

WILL TELEHEALTH SERVICES BE EXPENSIVE FOR MY PRACTICE TO IMPLEMENT?

Expensive equipment is no longer required to participate in a telehealth consultation. Devices such as laptops come with reasonable quality cameras, microphones and headphones that can be used for video consultations or sharing clinical information. The price of clinical software for implementing a telehealth consultation service can vary considerably depending on the vendor and product, so it is important to compare clinical software before purchasing. For example, a healthcare provider using software that offers features such as patient waiting rooms, full integration into practice software/with booking systems and billing integration is likely to be much more convenient (and expensive) than a less health-contextualised product that only provides video-sharing. Review step four of the [Implementation Guide](#) for support choosing software. Your decision should be influenced by your model of care and the level of intended telehealth consultation use. Sophisticated products may still be cost-effective and provide higher quality consultations when used frequently.

ARE THERE FINANCIAL INCENTIVES PROVIDED TO SPECIALISTS TO USE TELEHEALTH CONSULTATIONS?

Medicare rebates exist for the provision of telehealth consultations between specialists and patients. The Australian Government provides [guidance](#) on Medicare Benefits Schedule arrangements.



Setting up telehealth consultations

WHAT EQUIPMENT DO I NEED TO PROVIDE TELEHEALTH VIDEO CONSULTATIONS?¹⁹

The hardware specifications for telehealth consultations will vary depending on individual circumstances. For basic videoconferencing with patients, the following hardware is recommended:



A webcam to enable video. If your computer does not have an inbuilt webcam you can either purchase a computer monitor with an inbuilt webcam or purchase a USB webcam.



Microphone to enable verbal communication. Most devices come with inbuilt microphones, however, it is recommended to use headphones or a headset with a built-in microphone that will produce higher quality audio transmission.



Speakers (or headphones) to enable sound and to hear your patient. It might be possible to use inbuilt speakers in your computer or laptop, but a headset, headphones or speakers is likely to provide better quality telehealth consultations.



Quality Internet connection to enable quality video and audio connection.

It may be useful to have two computer screens to support telehealth interactions: one for telehealth software (e.g. to visually engage with the patient) and one to view patient medical records.

WHAT SOFTWARE WILL I NEED TO CONDUCT VIDEO CONSULTATIONS?

Hundreds of video conferencing platforms exist that enable telehealth consultations, and each differ on price, complexity and integration with practice software. Practices that have a high volume of video conferencing may find it worthwhile to invest in specific video-conferencing software designed for a health context rather than the less-expensive, less integrated solutions.

To help make an informed decision, review step four of the [Implementation Guide](#), which provides criteria that may be useful when choosing a software solution for telehealth.

HOW SHOULD I SET UP MY ROOM TO FOR TELEHEALTH CONSULTATIONS?

Video consultations may be conducted in a standard consulting room or can be set up in a separate private space, such as the treatment room. The room should be well-lit, avoid large differences in brightness (e.g. sitting in front a window with open blinds), and should be free of background stripes, cluttered space, or rapid movement. Ensure that you have a webcam or in-built camera, microphone, speakers and quality internet connection. A specialist is not confined to conducting telehealth consultations from within the practice but must have an appropriate space where they are conducting the telehealth consultation.

HOW DO I ENSURE I AM FREE AT THE TIME OF THE TELEHEALTH CONSULTATION?

Remote consultations should be booked in a similar manner to face-to-face consultations (e.g. in the specialist's diary for a specific time period) and should not cause major disruption to preparation activities. However, a key difference is that when running late, patients will not be sitting in the practice waiting room but rather will be in a remote location with a specific time in mind for the consultation. To account for this issue, practice staff should consider using a software solution that offers virtual waiting rooms for the patient or provides a realistic time buffer for waiting times to ensure the specialist and patient are running on time

WHAT HAPPENS IF I ENCOUNTER TECHNOLOGY ISSUES?



Video not working?

Check your webcam is connected, ensure you allowed the web browser to access your webcam, and check that the video has not been disabled (e.g. the video icon does not have a line through it).



Low video quality?

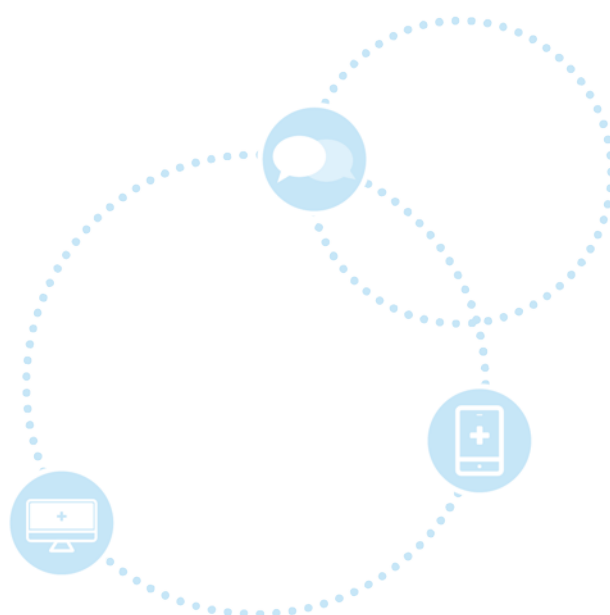
This is usually caused by a poor internet connection. Check your internet speed using one of many free online speed tests – you should have a minimum internet connection of 10mbps to use video.



Audio issues?

Check your speaker volume is turned up and check that neither you nor your patient have disabled your microphone (e.g. indicated by the microphone having a line through it).

To account for all potential technology issues, remember to always have a 'Plan B', such as having the patient's telephone number available to telephone. Additionally, all staff should understand where and how to contact the software vendor IT support team as each product will differ on troubleshooting issues. Practice staff should encourage patients to complete pre-call testing on the software platform to ensure that any technical issues can be identified, and troubleshooting can be undertaken prior to the telehealth consultation.



Considerations for patients

WILL TELEHEALTH CONSULTATIONS BE MORE DIFFICULT WITH PATIENTS WHO EXPERIENCE LOWER DIGITAL LITERACY?

Many software solutions enable patients to connect to a remote consultation via telehealth by following a link to a virtual waiting room (either provided in email or SMS), meaning that connecting is low-touch and not arduous, particularly compared to products that require unique accounts and logins. Support may still need to be provided for some individuals, such as the receptionist explaining how to locate and follow the link. Reception and practice management staff may need to spend time assisting with the coordination of consultations through tasks such as supporting patients to connect when your practice first commences telehealth consultations. This commitment should decrease over time as patients become more comfortable with using the technology that underpins telehealth consultations.

Other considerations: Additionally, considerations need to be made around technology and accessibility (e.g. to internet and mobile devices), individual factors (e.g. vision or hearing impairments), comfort with using required technologies and cultural appropriateness.

DON'T OLDER PEOPLE DISLIKE VIDEO CALLS?

Research demonstrates that older people tend to enjoy a video-format form of consultation.²⁰ Key benefits for aged and vulnerable patients include convenience, reduced travel and costs, reduced time away from home and less effort connecting with specialists. A recent discrete choice experiment conducted in Australia revealed that older people (n=330, mean age: 69) preferred that all health services suitable for delivery via telehealth to be provided in this way, based on factors such as distance to health services and cost.²¹

IS TELEHEALTH CONSULTATIONS ONLY SUITABLE FOR RURAL AND REMOTE PATIENTS?

While telehealth consultations provide benefits to patients in rural and remote locations, those located in metropolitan areas experience similar benefits in reduced travel, expense, time off work and other factors that may be perceived as inconvenient or time-consuming.

WILL TELEHEALTH CONSULTATIONS TAKE LONGER THAN FACE-TO-FACE CONSULTATIONS?

A well-integrated telehealth consultation service has been shown to reduce time managing patients, conducting unnecessary appointments and the duration of some consultations. Telehealth consultations can also increase patient attendance,²² and lead to shorter consultations that run to time contributing to an efficient delivery of services.²³

WHAT ARE THE PRIVACY REQUIREMENTS OF TELEHEALTH?

The general privacy and information security requirements of the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, for remote consultations relating to confidentiality, patient consent and security of patient information and medical records, are the same as for face-to-face consultations. For example, patients may record the consultation with or without the specialist's knowledge (dependent on your jurisdiction), just as they may record a face-to-face consultation. Video consultations bring a new dimension to privacy requirements given that they involve the transmission of sound, images and other data relating to the consultation. Consider reading the [Privacy Checklist for Telehealth Services](#) provided by the Australian Department of Health for additional guidance and consult your information and technology services provider for advice on meeting these requirements.

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