

Need doctor but don't want to leave home?

Try telemedicine

Corinne S Kennedy
 Memphis Commercial Appeal
 USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to spread, public officials have taken increasingly strict measures to enforce social distancing, including many cities and municipalities issuing "Safer at Home" orders. While essential travel, including attending medical appointments, remains permitted, some people may choose to postpone appointments that can be rescheduled or seek out telemedicine, allowing you to access medical care without leaving home and avoid potentially crowded waiting rooms.

According to the American Hospital Association, the number of hospitals offering telemedicine services rose from 35% in 2010 to 76% in 2017, and it is likely that the percentage has risen since then. There are also multiple independent websites and mobile apps that offer telemedicine appointments on-demand, either on your computer, a tablet or phone. Here's what you need to know if you want to schedule a telehealth appointment.

How to find a doctor

If you already regularly see a general practitioner or specialist, you can call their office and see if they already offer telehealth services or are planning to start soon. If you were looking to schedule with a new physician, call the clinic or doctor's office where you planned to make an appointment and see if they offer telehealth services or are able to direct you to a provider who does. You can also look for a medical professional through services like Amwell, Doctor on Demand, MD Live or PlushCare. Some sites offer visits on-demand, 24/7 — though there may be longer wait times due to high demand — while others schedule appointments.

Prescriptions

Doctors can write new prescriptions or refill old prescriptions during a telehealth visit and send them to your local pharmacy, even if the doctor isn't local.

They can also recommend which over-the-counter medications are the best to use if prescription drugs are not needed.

Coronavirus care

Doctors cannot diagnose COVID-19

in a virtual visit, but they can assess any symptoms you might have and tell you if they are consistent with the virus. They can advise you on whether you should get tested for the virus.

If they recommend testing, your telehealth provider can also help you locate local resources and testing centers, tell you whether you need to visit a hospital and offer tips on how to stay healthy during self-isolation. If they do recommend seeking additional medical care, your provider can also recommend how you should approach it, to ensure you are not putting other people or hospital staff at risk.

HIPAA regulations loosened

To make it easier for patients to connect with health care professionals during the coronavirus outbreak, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced on March 17 it was waiving potential penalties for violations of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the federal regulations that safeguard patient privacy.

That allows for doctors, nurses, therapists and other health care professionals to use less secure means of communication to get in touch with patients, as long as they're doing so in good faith.

If you do use a non-HIPAA compliant technology, such as Facebook Messenger, your provider should explain that to you and you have to consent to using the service. However, some services, like FaceTime, are secure enough that they are always HIPAA compliant.

Cost varies

Laws regulating telemedicine services have been changing as it becomes more common, even before the pandemic. If you're uncertain about whether your virtual visit will be covered, check with your insurance company before scheduling it.

As of March 17, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has broadened the types of telehealth visits that will be covered by Medicare and Medicaid. That will last through the duration of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency. If you don't have insurance or your insurance won't cover it, you can pay out of pocket. Visits via telehealth websites can cost between \$50 and \$200, depending on the provider and whether it's your first visit or a follow-up appointment.

Corinne Kennedy can be reached via email at Corinne.Kennedy@CommercialAppeal.com or on Twitter @CorinneSKennedy.