

WHITEPAPER

Telehealth's Emergence as a Must-Have Option



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INTRODUCTION

The onset of the COVID-19 public health emergency changed the healthcare industry virtually overnight. As businesses closed and shelter-in-place orders went into effect, telehealth services have become a must-have offering for most healthcare organizations.

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly accelerated the adoption of telehealth solutions and demonstrated that many of the perceived barriers to the use of telehealth — on the part of patients and providers alike — were unfounded or could effectively be circumvented or even eliminated. Healthcare organizations and systems rushed to implement or expand telehealth offerings and revise policies in a rapid shift that will have a lasting impact on the healthcare industry.

Now that the initial reactive phase has passed, many healthcare organizations are in the process of refining their virtual health policies and strategies to ensure the continued adoption and sustainment of their telehealth services.

This whitepaper will discuss how healthcare organizations can approach scaling their telehealth capabilities and business models to expand on access to care and profitability for long-term success.

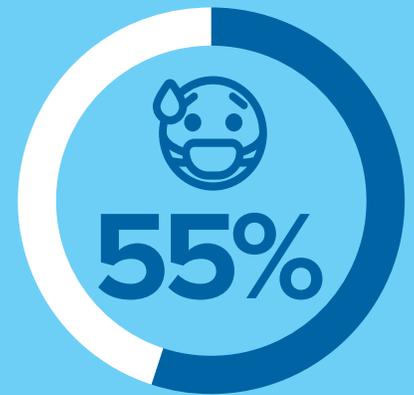


DEMONSTRATED BENEFITS OF TELEHEALTH

Telehealth has been proven to deliver numerous benefits, along with a myriad of use cases that unequivocally demonstrate the value of remote patient care. This is true even apart from the significant benefits evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Telehealth services expand access to care for many patients and allow providers to deliver care when and where patients need it, thus improving time to treatment and other key metrics related to patient satisfaction.

A recent consumer survey of 1,400 consumers in the U.S. revealed that 55% of consumers have delayed or avoided medical care due to the pandemic^[1] — a trend that could have life-threatening results. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, avoiding or delaying medical care was common, whether due to high healthcare costs or the time commitment involved in seeing a provider. More than half of millennials have stated they would delay or avoid medical treatment because of the costs involved.^[2] Born between 1981 and 1996, millennials have surpassed Baby Boomers as America's largest living adult generation, with a population of 72.1 million,^[3] making them a key healthcare demographic. Not only do millennials make up a large portion of the patient population, but they are also likely to be raising young children while also caring for aging parents.

Many survey respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with long wait times and felt that the quality of time spent with the provider was lacking. Consumers noted that providers often spent more time entering data into the medical record than interacting with the patient.



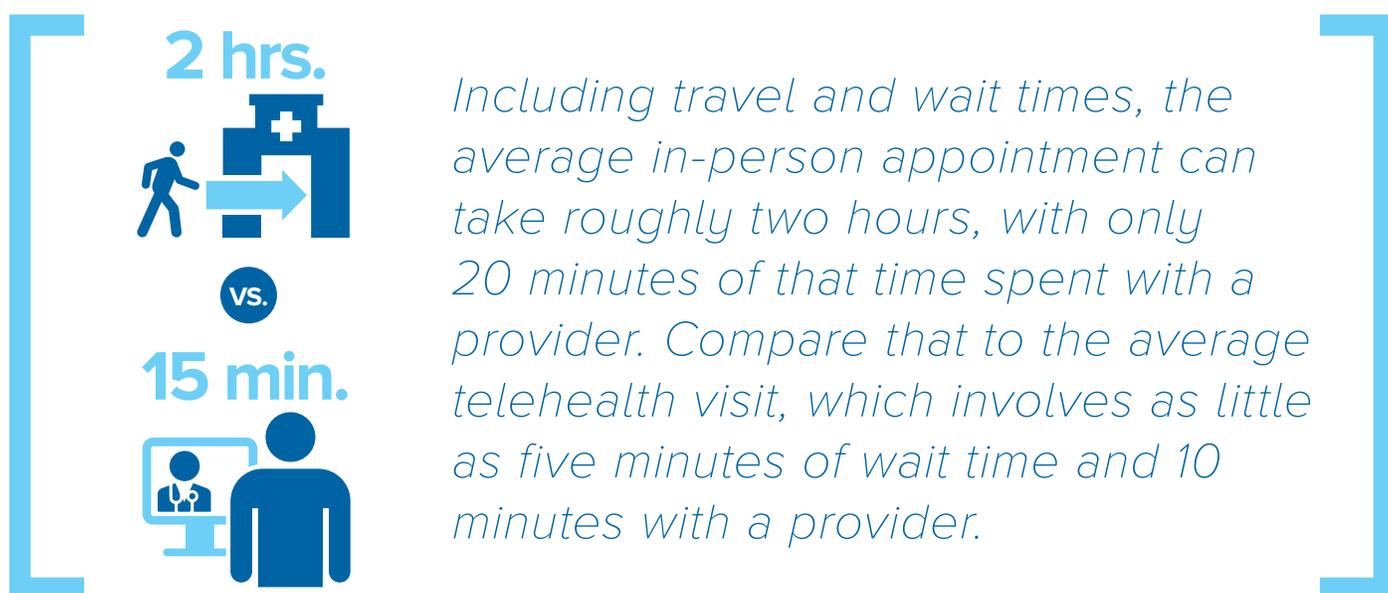
*A recent consumer survey of 1,400 consumers in the U.S. revealed that **55% of consumers have delayed or avoided medical care due to the pandemic**^[1] — a trend that could have life-threatening results.*

Telehealth services can alleviate many of these concerns. In addition to offering greater convenience, telehealth services often involve a lower copay and less of a time commitment than an in-person appointment. Including travel and wait times, the average in-person appointment can take roughly two hours, with only 20 minutes of that time spent with a provider. Compare that to the average telehealth visit, which involves as little as five minutes of wait time and 10 minutes with a provider.

Telehealth increases access to care in remote and rural areas, gives patients greater access to specialty care, addresses clinician shortages and helps scale provider workloads. Providing telehealth services also helps address equity challenges by expanding access to care for those who lack transportation or who otherwise have difficulty traveling to a clinic. Telehealth also helps address language barriers by allowing quick access to interpreters, which can be a challenge in face-to-face settings.

Regarding COVID-19, telehealth helps reduce risk for vulnerable patient populations by allowing them to receive care from home without risking exposure to the virus. Observational products can also permit a hospitalized patient to interact with care providers, specialists or even family members without the need for close contact, allowing providers to limit their own exposure and conserve PPE.

Telehealth can be integrated into nearly any field of medicine, often with results that are equal or even superior to in-person care. Behavioral health, for example, is one of the most well-established use cases for telehealth, which can lead to better outcomes than those achieved through face-to-face treatment.^[4]



The infographic is enclosed in large blue brackets. On the left, it features two rows of icons. The top row shows a person walking towards a building with a cross, with the text '2 hrs.' above it. Below this is a blue circle with 'vs.' inside. The bottom row shows a person at a computer screen with a doctor's icon, with the text '15 min.' above it. To the right of the icons, a blue italicized text block reads: 'Including travel and wait times, the average in-person appointment can take roughly two hours, with only 20 minutes of that time spent with a provider. Compare that to the average telehealth visit, which involves as little as five minutes of wait time and 10 minutes with a provider.'

HOW TO IMPLEMENT TELEHEALTH TO DRIVE ADOPTION BY PROVIDERS AND PATIENTS

In the early days of telehealth, virtual health strategies were focused heavily on technology. Due to continued advances in virtualization and cloud infrastructure, the technology required for virtual health services has become simpler and more accessible to consumers, leading to a shift in focus toward adoption and sustainment.

Driving provider and patient adoption of digital health requires a comprehensive strategy that takes all stakeholders and workflows into consideration. Successful telehealth implementation may involve updating provider workflows, standardizing systems, training and educating staff, addressing changes in staffing needs, overhauling patient communications and outreach campaigns and establishing a protocol for balancing telehealth with in-person visits when necessary.

If the technology is properly embedded, whether the patient is treated in-person, virtually or even asynchronously becomes irrelevant. This in turn makes it easier for caregivers to incorporate telehealth into delivery of care, and it makes it easier for the patient to receive the necessary care regardless of time or location. Easier adoption for patients and providers drives more opportunities for better outcomes, and thus the program is, in a way, self-sustaining.



Organizational change management

Successful telehealth adoption starts with effectively communicating the value and benefits of system changes. Perceptions towards telehealth have changed dramatically since the onset of COVID-19: 57% of providers have a more favorable view of telehealth now than before the start of the pandemic, and 64% of providers report that they are more comfortable using it.^[5] Concerns remain, however, particularly around security, workflow integration and the effectiveness of telehealth compared with in-person care.

Scalability

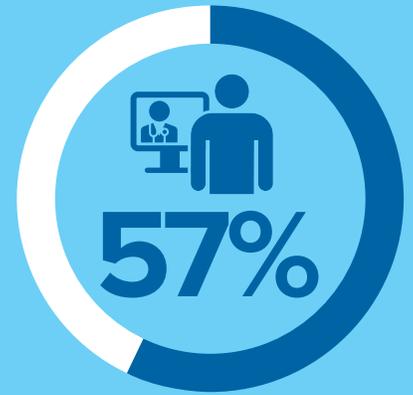
Telehealth solutions must be able to scale to meet sudden changes in demand, and networks must allow for sharp increases in capacity. When implementing or expanding your telehealth services, ensure that your IT staff and resources are able to scale as your virtual care demands fluctuate.

Integration and standardization

Workflows must be considered so that the virtual care platform can be integrated seamlessly and support a variety of care needs. Systems and solutions may need to be standardized to utilize legacy investments to full capacity.

Security

Telehealth requires ensuring appropriate control over your data, usage and deployment. Standards and privacy requirements will need to be considered, along with the necessary certifications and user access needs.



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Training and education

Successful and sustainable telehealth solutions require equipping providers to deliver high-quality and efficient care for improved health outcomes. Ongoing training will be necessary for providers and staff, including clinicians, accounting personnel and patient experience advocates. All staff should be fully trained on policies and protocols involved in telehealth applications to ensure continuity of care.

Technology integration

Substandard audio and video experiences create frustration for all users and work against adoption. Telehealth platforms must be user-friendly for both providers and patients, and they must be able to operate in difficult clinical settings. Building solutions on top of industry standards based hardware and software provides the most flexibility when it comes to reaching new patients and consulting outside the primary organization. Cameras and audio equipment must provide the highest-quality experience at the extreme ends of bandwidth.

Patient outreach and communication

Patient communication and outreach is integral to success with telehealth services. Gaps have been observed between consumers' stated interest in telehealth (76%) and actual usage (46%).^[5] Drivers of this gap include a lack of awareness of the digital tools available to patients and the types of care needs that can be virtualized. Patients must be notified of the telehealth offerings available to them and how to access them. Marketing teams should be tasked with developing campaigns to promote telehealth awareness, and messaging should be distributed across all marketing channels. Healthcare CRM technology can be leveraged to communicate with existing patients and increase their awareness of telehealth services available to them for routine or follow-up care.

Evaluation

The continued development of telehealth services requires defining the key performance indicators that will be used to measure utilization and success. These metrics should be measured and analyzed on an ongoing basis to gauge success and identify areas in need of optimization.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CONSOLIDATED PLATFORM THAT CAN SERVE MULTIPLE USE CASES

An effective telehealth platform has applications across the continuum of care and is able to rapidly scale to support multiple visit types, including virtual clinic visits, specialty consultations and on-demand or urgent care sessions.

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, most telehealth services were focused on connecting patients with urgent care physicians. Now, telehealth is increasingly recognized as an extremely effective strategy for non-emergency medical care that can be applied to almost any field of medicine. Some of the most beneficial telehealth use cases include behavioral health, post-operative care, primary care, specialty care, in-home care and integrated care management. For a telehealth platform to handle these and other divergent use cases, it must allow for seamless content sharing with patients and other providers.

The platform must also be able to rapidly scale for changes in demand as new users are onboarded. The level of performance must be reliable under increased operational demands, supporting thousands of physicians connecting from their office, home or any remote location with no service degradation. The platform must also allow for connectivity and interoperability with any device, and it must adhere to privacy and security requirements.



BRANDING TELEHEALTH AS AN IN-HOUSE RESOURCE AS A BENEFIT/DIFFERENTIATOR FOR PATIENTS

The healthcare industry has always been slow to adopt innovations in technology. In our increasingly connected world, consumers expect more convenient access to services in all areas of their lives. Many industries have responded to this demand by using digital technology, but the healthcare industry has traditionally offered a far lower level of convenience than other service industries.

A recent survey revealed that consumers include telehealth services in their selection criteria when choosing a provider, with the highest interest among those aged 35–44 and parents with children under the age of 18. Two-thirds of parents with young children are interested in telehealth services, and 20% of consumers would be willing to change providers to one offering telehealth services.^[5]

Patients have choices as to where they receive care. As with any other consumable, the patient will return to the business that provides a good experience or outcome. Providers have a vested interest in establishing themselves as top-of-mind the next time patients need care, and reliable telehealth services can provide that key differentiator. A telehealth offering that is specifically branded for the provider also helps establish themselves as a business that is keeping up with advances in technology and committed to responding to patient needs.

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HOW TO MEASURE THE VALUE OF TELEHEALTH

The value created by telehealth services may be different for every organization. While telehealth offerings may involve a sizable initial investment, the cost of new technology and implementation is justified by the numerous benefits those services provide, including reduced readmission rates, increased patient retention and improved patient satisfaction.

Determine up front what problems telehealth services can help your organization solve. Offering patient satisfaction surveys at the conclusion of virtual visits is a critical element in continually improving the experience for both patient and provider.

Some examples of virtual health key performance indicators may include:

- Reduced readmission rates
- Improved patient retention
- Lower claim expenses
- Enhanced provider-to-provider communications and collaboration
- Reduced length of ED stay
- Diverting patients away from unnecessary office-based and emergency room care
- Attracting new patients
- Decreased wait times for patients in need of crisis services
- New revenue streams for healthcare systems
- Reduced hospital transfers
- Increased efficiencies of existing clinical staff

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that many of the perceived barriers to telehealth adoption were surmountable. In the wake of the initial drive for telehealth expansion, now is the time for healthcare organizations to refine their strategy for greater sustainability. Safe and expanded access to care will continue to be a necessity as the healthcare industry responds to the challenges presented by the continuing public health crisis.

ABOUT IRON BOW

Iron Bow Healthcare Solutions is at the forefront of developing, manufacturing, implementing, managing and supporting virtual care solutions. For the past decade, Iron Bow has deployed and managed some of the largest enterprise virtual care programs in the world, and it continues to bring innovative solutions to the healthcare market. Iron Bow has been providing IT solutions to healthcare, government and industry organizations for over 30 years. Our technology expertise combined with our extensive healthcare industry and clinical workflow knowledge enables our delivery of scalable telehealth programs to achieve enhanced delivery and quality of care.

Contact us

To learn more about Iron Bow's telehealth solutions or schedule a demo, visit ironbowhealthcare.com.



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