Pulmonary Fibrosis Foundation™



Telemedicine Basics

FOR THE PULMONARY FIBROSIS PATIENT

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Have questions that aren't answered in this guide?

Contact the PFF Help Center at 844.TalkPFF (844.825.5733) or help@pulmonaryfibrosis.org.

Telemedicine: A virtual visit to your healthcare provider

Telemedicine is the use of technology—smartphone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer—to connect patients directly with their healthcare providers.

Many people are most familiar with interactive telemedicine, which happens in real time and may take the place of an in-person office visit. Interactive telemedicine is popular for both primary and specialty care (like when you need to see your lung doctor). It can also be helpful for managing chronic illnesses and medications. During a telemedicine visit, your healthcare provider may see how you are doing, diagnose, and treat you. Healthcare providers can do things like write prescriptions and order tests through interactive telemedicine.

Telemedicine also may be asynchronous. Asynchronous telemedicine involves healthcare providers and patients exchanging e-mail-like messages or sharing medical information like lab reports, imaging studies, and videos, often through patient portals such as "MyChart" (also see page 4). In remote patient monitoring, patients use devices at home to collect and send information to healthcare providers for monitoring. Remote patient monitoring is most often used for patients with chronic illnesses, people at high risk for illness or complications from an illness, and patients recently released from the hospital.

Over the past few years, telemedicine has become increasingly popular, but since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, telemedicine has become much more common. Some laws, insurance requirements, and healthcare provider rules about telemedicine have changed to make it easier to reduce person-to-person contact during COVID-19. This booklet provides an overview of a telemedicine "visit" with your healthcare provider: what to expect, how to prepare for and participate in a successful appointment, and what to do after the visit.

Telemedicine vs. telehealth

The terms telemedicine and telehealth are often used interchangeably. Technically speaking, telemedicine refers to clinical services provided via technology, while telehealth includes a wider range of medical initiatives, such as public health alerts and online medical conferences.

PROS AND CONS OF TELEMEDICINE

Telemedicine gives patients more options, but it isn't right for every healthcare situation. It has many benefits—and some drawbacks, too.

PROS

- Saves time, including travel and wait times
- Avoids exposure to germs and infectious diseases
- Allows access to medical providers who aren't near you
- Makes medical appointments easier for patients who are very sick or have limited mobility
- Can be scheduled during a work break
- May save money—the average telemedicine visits costs less than an in-person visit, and you may also save money by not taking time off work, using transportation, or paying for childcare
- Offers the comfort of your own surroundings

CONS

- You'll need a good internet connection and the right device (smartphone, tablet, or computer)
- Not all health problems and procedures are right for telemedicine
- Your healthcare provider can only do a very limited exam and may not be able to do all the tests that are usually performed at the office visit
- Depending on state laws, you may not be able to have a telemedicine visit with a healthcare provider outside of your state
- Healthcare providers may still want you to make an in-person visit after a telemedicine appointment
- Your insurance company may require you to use its telemedicine providers
- Not all health systems and medical practices are able to offer telemedicine—talk to your healthcare provider to see if it's an option for you

WHEN TO SEE A HEALTHCARE PROVIDER IN PERSON

Since your healthcare provider cannot touch your body, listen to your lungs, take blood samples, perform X-rays or other imaging, or provide other clinical services that require you to be in the office, telemedicine has some limitations.

Many healthcare providers recommend that first-time patient visits take place in person and reserve telemedicine appointments for follow-up visits. People who have problems with their sight or hearing may find telemedicine visits more challenging.

If you're not sure if you need to come into the office, call your healthcare provider to ask. For pulmonary fibrosis patients, healthcare providers might ask you to come into the office for reasons like these:

- Oxygen levels that decline more than is typical for your current activity
- Fever
- Increased shortness of breath with nonproductive cough
- A symptom that is new or concerning to you
- A general feeling that you're doing worse or that something is wrong

IMPORTANT:
Telemedicine is not for emergencies

Telemedicine is not appropriate in emergency situations like heart attack, stroke, serious cuts and lacerations, or broken bones—anything that requires immediate, hands-on healthcare attention. Get medical care immediately if you have persistent pain or pressure in the chest or bluish lips or face. Your caregiver or another person who lives with you should also seek emergency care for you if you have new confusion or cannot be awakened.

PREPARING FOR YOUR APPOINTMENT

Because you won't be meeting with your healthcare provider in person, a telemedicine visit requires a little extra preparation to help your provider give you the best possible care. Before your visit:

- Make a list of all your medications, including how much you take of each medication and the times of day that you take each medication. Include vitamins and other over-the-counter (non-prescription) drugs.
- Make a list of any prescriptions that need refill orders from your healthcare provider.
- Write down any symptoms you've been experiencing and if anything has changed since your last visit.
- Weigh yourself and take your temperature. If you have a pulse oximeter and/or blood pressure cuff, check your oxygen levels, heart rate, and/or blood pressure. Write down all of this information so you can share it with your healthcare provider.
- Your healthcare provider's office may ask you to have pulmonary function tests or bloodwork done before your telemedicine visit. Ask what's needed—and get any tests—as far before the appointment as possible.
- To make sure you can freely discuss your health issues, choose a quiet, private place to have your telemedicine visit. Be sure you have good lighting and reliable internet connectivity in your chosen spot.
- It may be helpful to have a trusted family member or friend be present for the telemedicine visit to take notes, so you can focus on listening to your provider.
- Make sure you have the right technology and it's working correctly (see page 3).

Protecting privacy

As with an in-person visit, the health information you share during a telemedicine appointment is covered by the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which places strict limitations on how that information can be shared. However, because of the need to quickly ramp up telemedicine access during COVID-19, the US Department of Health and Human Services is allowing healthcare providers to use non-HIPAA compliant videoconferencing like Skype and FaceTime. If you're concerned about privacy, ask your healthcare provider if a HIPAA-compliant telemedicine solution is available.

Two memories are better than one

Ask a close relative, caregiver, or housemate to help you prepare the list of recent symptoms, medications, and other information you'll share with your healthcare provider during your telemedicine visit. It's easy for minor health events like a brief dizzy spell or a new over-the-counter medicine to slip our minds—having someone close to you help you make the list ensures it's as complete as possible.

INSURANCE COVERAGE

Insurance coverage for telemedicine visits has increased during the coronavirus pandemic, and laws and rules continue to change. Medicare and Medicaid, which used to cover telemedicine only for rural patients, have expanded coverage for the length of the COVID-19 crisis. Many private insurers also have widened telemedicine coverage during the pandemic, and some states require insurers to cover telemedicine visits during the COVID-19 emergency.

For details on what your insurance will pay for, ask your insurance carrier, check the website of your state health department, or check your company's employee benefits guidelines. If your insurance doesn't cover telemedicine and you decide to pay for the visit yourself, a telemedicine visit is generally less expensive than an in-person visit.

TROUBLESHOOTING TECHNOLOGY

When you make your appointment, your healthcare provider's office will tell you what program or app it's using for telemedicine visits. To reduce stress and make the most of your time with your healthcare provider, it's best to set up and double-check the technology you'll need ahead of your visit. Ask a relative or friend for technology help if you don't feel confident on your own.

- Figure out what device you'll use for your visit: your smartphone, tablet, or computer.
- Have a backup plan: if you have a last-minute problem joining the visit on your computer, plan to join on your smartphone or phone if necessary.
- Be sure your hardware, software, and Internet connection can handle a video visit. A wired connection is usually better than Wi-Fi. If your healthcare provider uses an app for telemedicine visits, download it before your visit. You may also need to create a user account within the app or in a web-based program.
- Test-run the technology ahead of time. Download/install any necessary updates. Check how you'll appear in your camera and test your microphone.
- Before the visit, make sure your device is charged or plugged in. Check to make sure that your volume is at a good level.

DURING AND AFTER YOUR VISIT

When you sit down to have your telemedicine visit, have paper and pen handy. Consider having a family member or other trusted person with you to provide another set of ears for your healthcare provider's feedback and instructions. Here are tips for getting the most from your telemedicine visit:

- Check in a few minutes early. Just as you may spend time in a waiting room before an in-person appointment, be prepared to wait a short time to be connected for your telemedicine visit. Similar to an office visit, the first part of your appointment may be with a nurse or technician to verify your name and birthdate, collect information such as your weight and oxygen levels, and update the list of your medications.
- Speak clearly, making sure your healthcare provider can hear you. Ensure you can be clearly seen through your camera.
- Clearly tell your healthcare provider your symptoms and answer your provider's questions.
- Take detailed notes on the healthcare provider's instructions. Ask questions if something isn't clear.
- After a telemedicine consultation, you may not receive the written visit summary you're normally given at an in-person consultation. As your appointment is ending, be sure you understand next steps for you and your healthcare provider, including follow-up tests, changes in medications, next visits, and methods for communicating with your healthcare provider. It's a good idea to review these things aloud with your healthcare provider.
- When your visit is over, promptly follow up with any instructions you received for next steps.

Be patient with yourself and your healthcare provider. We're all learning to use new technology together. Your healthcare provider knows that many patients are participating in telemedicine for the first time, so don't worry if it takes some time to figure out.

Using a patient portal

If your healthcare provider offers an online patient portal, think about setting up a user account if you don't already have one. Patient portals are convenient, privacy-protected ways to review after-visit summaries, lab results, and instructions for follow-up. If your healthcare provider allows it, you can also use the portal to contact your provider directly via secure, email-like messaging. You may need to ask your healthcare provider's office for an access code or other setup instructions before you can create a portal user account.

NEXT APPOINTMENT

Date _____ Time _____

Healthcare provider _____

NOTES

Use this section to jot down information you want to share with your healthcare provider, take notes during your appointment, or write down follow-up instructions.

Pulmonary Fibrosis Foundation™

223 W. Jackson Blvd., Suite 350
Chicago, Illinois, 60606
844.TalkPFF (844.825.5733)
help@pulmonaryfibrosis.org
pulmonaryfibrosis.org

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