Patient Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Use of Virtual Care
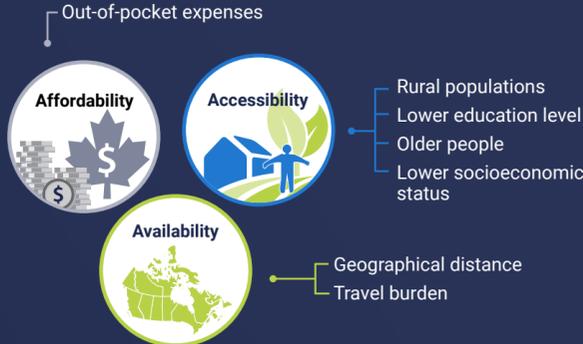
A Comprehensive, Practical Guide for Health Care Providers in Canada and Globally

Developed by Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Canada, in partnership with Canada Health Infoway

Benefits of virtual care during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Increases health care capacity
- Optimizes health care professionals' time and infrastructure
- Reduces per capita health care cost
- Timely & convenient
- Efficient
- Safe with reduced risk of transmission

Virtual care helps address current barriers to health care

Out-of-pocket expenses

Affordability

Accessibility
- Rural populations
- Lower education level
- Older people
- Lower socioeconomic status

Availability
- Geographical distance
- Travel burden

Guide to Virtual Care

1 Regulatory Standards

In the absence of standalone virtual care guidelines established by licensing bodies in Canada, nonphysician health care providers should **seek guidance from their own professional and licensing bodies**.

Resources for general guidance are provided by multiple bodies:
- The Canadian Medical Association's Virtual Care Playbook
- Local guidance by provincial and territorial professional organizations for physicians
- Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons' pan-Canadian list of virtual care resources
- Medicolegal advice provided by the Canadian Medical Protective Association (CMPA)

2 Platforms for Virtual Care

Platforms can be regulated or unregulated.

Regulated platforms comply with Canada's federal Personal Information Protection and Electronics Document Act (PIPEDA) and relevant provincial and territorial privacy laws (eg, Ontario's PHIPA).

Unregulated platforms are those that do not meet the federal and provincial/territorial privacy standards (FaceTime, WhatsApp, Google Duo, etc).

How to choose a platform for virtual care?
- Opt for platforms supporting **secure** services and **multiple features**
- **Seek clearance** from your organization's privacy and security officer
- Develop **familiarity** with the selected platform and equipment

3 Technology and Troubleshooting

How can providers ensure a smooth experience for themselves and the patient?
- Use an **internet-enabled** device with a **reliable connection**
- Preferably use devices with a **built-in camera**, **speaker**, and **microphone**
- Check the **network** (**bandwidth**) requirements before use

4 Digital Privacy and Consent

- Physicians and patients should take appropriate precautions to **ensure the privacy of health care information**
- **Seek guidance** from the College of Family Physicians of Canada, CMPA, or local or regional professional associations.
- **Discuss consent with the patient** at sign-up and **before beginning** any virtual care interaction

5 Patient Selection

Virtual care is an effective alternative to in-person care for many but not all medical conditions and clinical scenarios.

✔ Ideal for nonacute or routine clinical activities (eg, reviewing test results, counseling, follow-ups)
✘ Not ideal for sensitive cases (eg, hands-on physical exam, discussing complex diagnostic plans, breaking bad news)

Who is an ideal patient for virtual care?
- Has access to the required technology and the internet
- Is comfortable using the modality (eg, video technology, messaging, email)
- No physical/sensory/cognitive disabilities (recommend support by family and/or friends)

Use professional judgment to decide the suitability of patients, medical conditions, and clinical encounters for virtual visits.

6 Virtual Care Workflow

It is mandatory to document all health care encounters as captured in the patient's health record.

Registration → Appointment → Scheduling → Clinical documentation

A **double workflow** may be needed to ensure all encounter details are captured in the patient's health record: (1) for the virtual care platform and (2) for the provider's medical record system.

Some virtual care platforms integrate the visit into the provider's electronic health record, patient portal, or hospital information system.

7 Patient Setup and Education

- Gauge **patient-readiness** for using technology before a virtual care visit
- Some patients may choose to use **audio-only** telephone visits
- With prior consent, **invite a family member, friend, or carer to assist** the patient during the virtual visit
- Advise the patient to keep hearing or visual aids handy

8 Recommended Etiquette or "Webside Manner"

Technical Considerations
✔ Direction and placement of cameras
✔ Recommend an in-person visit in cases of communication breakdown

Communication Skills
✔ Speak slowly and clearly
✔ Listening carefully to the patient's concerns
✔ Use nonmedical terms for clarity
✔ Lags in communication are common
✔ Pause and ask if the patient can understand you
✔ Reiterate and summarize messages
✔ Use screen-sharing modes to discuss medical images and lab reports
✔ Be kind and compassionate!

9 Environment and Setting

How to prepare for a virtual visit?

Clinical administrative staff should guide the patient to setup before the appointment:
- Minimal distractions and adequate lighting
- High-quality internet connection
- At least face and shoulders should be visible
- Switch mobile phones and other devices to silent mode
- Make introductions first with family members, friends, and care providers

Some visits may need additional considerations:
- Enough space for the patient to stand and move away from the camera, so their entire body is visible
- A comfortable yet easily movable chair for the patient to rest
- Equipment required by the patient should be easily accessible

Summary: Health care providers should aim to consistently deliver high-quality, equitable, and professional virtual care to inspire patients with the trust needed to continue follow-up of their care during the COVID-19 crisis.

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