

WHAT IS TELEMEDICINE?

Telemedicine (also sometimes called telehealth) services are a way to deliver healthcare services locally to a patient when the healthcare provider is located at a distant site. Telemedicine is generally defined as the use of electronic information and communications technology to exchange medical information from one site to another site to provide medical or surgical treatment to a patient and/or to participate in the medical diagnosis of, or medical opinion or medical advice to, a patient.

When a healthcare provider believes a patient may benefit from the use of telemedicine services, telemedicine can maintain a continuity of care with the provider and facilitate patient self-management and caregiver support of the patient. Telemedicine services often provides a broader access to medical care, eliminates transportation concerns, and increases comfort and familiarity for patients and their families when located in their own homes or other local environments.

However, telemedicine uses new communications technology for which there is little research supporting its effectiveness. For example, telemedicine services may not be as complete as in-person healthcare services because the healthcare provider will not always be able to observe subtle non-verbal communications such as a patient's posture, facial expression, gestures, and tone of voice.

Telemedicine may transfer medical information through the use of interactive, real-time audio/visual technology (for example, video conferencing) or electronic data interchange (for example, computer-to-computer exchanges), or it may transfer medical information through the use of store-and-forward technology (for example, emails). While precautions are taken to secure the confidentiality of telemedicine services, the electronic transmission of medical information can be incomplete, lost or otherwise disrupted by technical failures. Additionally, despite such measures, the transmission and storage of medical information can be accessed by unauthorized persons, causing a breach of the patient's privacy.