

Renal Patients in a World of Telehealth

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As a home dialysis patient, my health and treatment are important to me and my dialysis team. Having good health requires active communication with my care team, which includes my nephrologist, nurse, dietitian and social worker. With the direct contact, support and guidance of my team, I can make decisions that result in a healthier lifestyle. Being able to connect in-person with my team provides a chance to interact on a more personal level. Unfortunately, as we've experienced with the recent Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, being up-close and face-to-face is not always ideal for my health.

Dialysis and transplant patients are at a higher risk of becoming very ill due to our underlying health condition(s). In situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary for patients to limit exposure. One way of continuing to have access to care but limiting exposure is through the use of telehealth.

What is Telehealth/Telemedicine?

Recently, more than ever, you may have heard of the terms telehealth and/or telemedicine. Telehealth is a program used for patients to receive care in the comfort of their own home without face-to-face exposure to others in their community. Telehealth may include video with audio, telephone, internet, fax or wireless communications. As a result of COVID-19, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has extended access to telehealth. Now patients can receive services from their doctors without having to travel to an office. If you are a home dialysis patient like me, the facility staff doesn't have to visit your home. This has been of great benefit to dialysis and transplant patients.



Benefits of Telehealth

- ✓ Limits exposure to possible infections
- ✓ Eliminates unnecessary travel
- ✓ Provides an opportunity to talk with members of your team all at once
- ✓ Saves money and time
- ✓ Remote video chat promotes patient independence at home
- ✓ Provides a level of control over your care
- ✓ Family member and/or caregiver can be present during the telehealth call

Telehealth Tips

- ✓ A member of the care team will provide instructions for how to join a session.
- ✓ Download the app and ask for help, if needed.
- ✓ Test the app, play around and use its options.
- ✓ Ask in advance who will be in attendance at your next telehealth visit.

- ✓ Write down questions or concerns that you will ask.
- ✓ Choose a quiet and comfortable place in your house with a good Wi-Fi signal.
- ✓ Sign in early to deal with any technical problems.
- ✓ Have a notebook and pen ready to take notes during the call. If you have difficulty doing this, ask a family member or caregiver to help with note-taking.
- ✓ Get dressed to look and feel your best!

What to Ask During a Telehealth Visit

Consider asking your care provider about the following topics during your telehealth visit.

- ✓ Medication refills
- ✓ Lab results
- ✓ Any necessary dietary changes
- ✓ Social services or needs (ask insurance questions, vocational interest, travel plans)
- ✓ Any supplies needed

Telehealth Barriers

There are two common patient concerns regarding telehealth. These are valid concerns, especially as telehealth becomes more widely known and as we adapt to it. They include:

- a) The perception of telehealth care as inferior to in-person care
- b) Fear of receiving care without in-person medical oversight

There are also barriers patients face in this new world of telehealth, including:

- Limited access to high speed internet
- Limited access to smartphones or computers
- Mistrust of technology and health care
- Limited understanding of how to use telehealth
- Needing in-person assistance to navigate telehealth
- Misdiagnosis

If after using telehealth you do not feel comfortable with the diagnosis and/or feel you need further evaluation, please go to a hospital or visit your primary care doctor in person. There may be a time when your nephrologist or nurse will advise you to be examined in person, have a test done, or go to the nearest emergency department. It is important to follow the advice of your care team.

Food for Thought

Having a family member assist with telehealth will help make the experience easier on you. This would be similar to having your spouse and/or a family member to join at your in-person visit. Telehealth has great potential to enhance the care of renal patients. Speak to your primary care doctor, health care team, dialysis facility staff and additional care providers about taking advantage of a telehealth program today!