

Behavioral health virtual visits

Empowering individuals to get care on their own terms



Behavioral health conditions are widespread. In fact, one in five American adults each year is affected by mental health and substance use disorders.¹ Despite their prevalence, many behavioral conditions are left undiagnosed or untreated, which can lead to serious consequences, increased risk of other major medical conditions, higher incidence of premature death and higher total costs of care.^{2,3,4}

Virtual visits can break down traditional barriers to behavioral care by offering real-time audio/video-enabled sessions with a provider — from the comfort of home, work or any other private location with internet connectivity. Virtual visits deliver the same outcomes as in-person visits for many conditions, and meet the same standards of care set by the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA).⁵ They also allow for more flexible scheduling, so individuals can get into care more quickly — increasing engagement and improving overall health outcomes.⁶ Individuals are already embracing this new modality, with most adults who have tried a behavioral health virtual visit reporting that they would be willing to continue to seek care virtually.⁷

By enabling members to access behavioral health care on their terms, virtual visits can help expand and expedite access to quality care for people in need, lower the total cost of care and improve flexibility for both members and providers.



Virtual visits can break down traditional barriers to behavioral care by offering real-time, audio/video-enabled sessions with a provider — from the comfort of home, work or any other private location with internet connectivity.

Barriers to traditional in-person care

Shortage of providers

Nearly 40% of the U.S. population lives in regions suffering from a shortage of mental health providers, meaning limited or delayed access to services for many.⁸

Busy schedules

People are leading increasingly complicated lives. Compared to their peers from previous generations, individuals may spend more hours at work, commuting and fulfilling family obligations. Many lack the time or flexibility necessary to travel to and from a behavioral health appointment.

Stigma

Although behavioral health disorders require the same attention and support as medical conditions, a sense of shame about these conditions persists. Individuals may be too embarrassed or afraid to seek help through traditional methods.

How virtual visits break down barriers

Expands access to care

Virtual behavioral health sessions have been shown to be as effective as face-to-face visits for a range of conditions.⁹ In fact, in a recent study conducted by Optum, members who used virtual visits used other therapy services significantly less following virtual treatment than their counterparts in traditional, in-person treatment.¹⁰

Lessens wait times for appointments

Wait times for first appointments drop considerably — typically from about three weeks to one week — or even less. This is especially significant when individuals are seeking care from scarce specialists who may be hours away from their home. Members with faster access to behavioral care have higher levels of engagement and better treatment outcomes.¹² In fact, telehealth overall has been shown to increase patient engagement and satisfaction by 97%.¹³

Eases concerns about stigma

Individuals can engage in virtual visits without having to physically enter a provider's office, helping dispel fears of stigmatization.

Fosters connections with PCPs, ERs and schools

Virtual visits facilitate collaborations with providers in primary care, emergency room and school settings to support a whole-person approach and improve outcomes. Optum Behavioral Health members have virtual access to the Family Coaching component of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) treatment, so families and caregivers of children with autism can access support and guidance without the hassle of driving to and from an appointment.

Creates more flexible scheduling for members and providers

In this larger pool of clinicians, opportunities for creative scheduling thrive. Individuals can opt for a lunchtime appointment in a reserved conference room at work or later at home from the comfort of their couch. This reduces concerns about missing work or family responsibilities. With this broader range of time and location, virtual visits providers could see fewer cancellations and no-shows — meaning more people would be receiving the care that they need.

More expansive scheduling also helps providers add more patients to their practice and maintain vital treatment for existing patients with scheduling difficulties. Optum has over 10,000 providers in the network, with clinicians licensed in all 50 states, enabling members across the country to access care more conveniently. All virtual visits providers in the Optum network are able to continue to practice in-person, as well as virtually.

“Telehealth ... can improve health care access outcomes, particularly for chronic disease treatment and for vulnerable groups. Not only [can it] reduce demands on crowded facilities ... [it can] also create cost savings and make the health sector more resilient.”¹¹

— World Health Organization

Reduces behavioral and medical costs

When people feel better mentally, they are more likely to adhere to the treatment plan for their chronic disease. Today, about 55 million people with a mental illness also have a lifelong medical condition, such as heart disease or diabetes.¹⁵ For example, research has shown that the costs for individuals with diabetes and depression are twice as high as their counterparts who are not depressed.¹⁶ Evidence is building that virtual visits can help these individuals improve their mental and physical health as well as lessen their overall medical costs.

A recent Optum study concluded that members who used virtual visits had, on average, 16% lower overall behavioral health care expenditures following treatment compared to the members who sought in-person care.¹⁷

↑ 97%

Telehealth overall has been shown to increase patient engagement and satisfaction by 97%.¹⁴



How a virtual visit works

All members need to get started is a **computer, smartphone or tablet** with a camera capability, up-to-date internet browser and high-speed internet connection. Patients can choose from providers in their network who offer virtual visits and are licensed in their state.

By phone or online, they **schedule a virtual appointment** with a provider. Members who are seeing providers who use the Optum virtual visits platform will be able to **securely schedule and conduct their visit using a single online portal**. Providers using alternative, approved platforms will send an invitation to the patient to **download video conferencing software** that is data-encrypted and HIPAA compliant. When it's appointment time, provider and patient both log on, and treatment begins virtually in real time.

Optum virtual visits are covered by many health plans as an outpatient benefit, the same as in-person visits, subject to equal copay and coinsurance rates. Whether virtually or face to face, **providers offer evaluation, therapy and medication management** that adhere to the same standards of care.

How to expand access to virtual visits

Expanding access through virtual visits will take action from everyone with a stake in this complex issue — employers, health plans and the behavioral health community —

to make virtual visits available to those who need them. This response can include:

- Promoting recognition of the efficacy of virtual visits among health plans and employers
- Educating PCPs about virtual visits, so they know when to refer to this modality
- Encouraging more behavioral health providers to offer virtual visits
- Building the number of providers who incorporate virtual care into their practice, which will create greater acceptance and availability
- Informing individuals about the availability of virtual visits

By enabling members to access behavioral health care on their own terms, virtual visits can help expand and expedite access to quality care for people in need, lower the total cost of care and improve flexibility for both members and providers.

For more information, visit optum.com/behavioralhealth or contact your Optum representative.

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