

LivingWell

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After serving Aging Partners and the older adult community for a combined 60 years, Program Supervisor Sandy Lutz, left, and Care Management Coordinator Joyce Kubicek retire.



Telemedicine: Accessing Health Care Services Virtually

While telemedicine has been around for years, virtual health care visits have skyrocketed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bryan Health ezVisit, for example, has seen an 800 percent increase in use.

Some individuals are now using virtual health care services out of necessity, and many clinics are connecting physicians and patients, typically over a form of video communication.

These telehealth consults enable doctors to triage patients without the risk of potential COVID-19 spread, and patients can get quick treatment for their symptoms. Physicians also can determine if a patient needs to come in for a more thorough exam.

For common minor illnesses, the use of an urgent care virtual visit may be helpful. Bryan Health ezVisit, for example, provides 24/7 direct-to-consumer virtual care. Patients answer a few questions about their health symptoms using a computer, phone or tablet. A board-certified doctor reviews symptoms and recommends treatment for minor illness, such as flu, fever, ringworm, pink eye, and sinus infections, bladder infections and yeast infections. If more information or testing is required, patients are referred to the care they need.

For more in-depth and specialized care, Bryan Telemedicine offers partnerships with hospitals and clinics through virtual acute care programs, support programs and outpatient specialist programs in areas such as cardiology, endocrinology, infectious disease, urology, pulmonology and more. Through these programs, hospitals are able to bring highly specialized providers to the inpatient setting where access to specialties may be limited.

“In these cases, a patient schedules a visit with their specialty provider and then visits a local health care facility where the clinic staff assists them in interacting via the telemedicine technology,” said Jill Hull, executive director of operations at Bryan Telemedicine and Teledigm Health.

Clinic staff can help facilitate in-depth assessments such as blood draws, x-rays and other special imaging. A telemedicine stethoscope can

be used to listen to heart sounds, and remotely controlled cameras help ensure high-quality care and a great patient experience. A physician will review the information, see the patient with the use of fully encrypted video and provide the same quality of care a patient would receive if they were in person.

This service is especially helpful in rural locations that would otherwise rely on specialists to travel to the facility and host occasional outpatient clinics.

“Now, we can bring those same experts in via telemedicine,” said Andrew Whitney, director of virtual platforms at Bryan Telemedicine and Teledigm Health.

Bryan Telemedicine works with 80 facilities across nine states, a majority of those are rural locations, helping provide affordable, convenient and trusted care to small communities.



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Advantages and Disadvantages

Since telemedicine might not be a perfect fit for everyone or every medical condition, make sure you discuss the best option for care with your physician.

Potential benefits include limiting physical contact, reducing potential exposure to additional illnesses, reducing office wait times, reducing time away from work, and addressing health issues wherever a patient is located — ideal for those who are homebound or without transportation.

Telemedicine also allows physicians to visit multiple patients across a region without traveling, giving them the ability to see rural patients on a more frequent basis and at a lower cost.

Using telemedicine, however, can be difficult without the proper internet access or electronic devices. Those on a limited income or who live in areas where internet access isn't available or reliable are at a disadvantage.

Older adults have found the option of telemedicine care from home very useful, especially during the pandemic. However, even with the resources available, some may not prefer or be comfortable with telemedicine or skilled with the electronics needed to use it.

You should always check with your health insurance to see whether telehealth visits are covered. During the COVID-19 outbreak, government health care programs opened regulations and Medicare began reimbursing patients for telehealth services. Previously, the government limited telehealth to particular circumstances such as patients living in rural areas and those typically needing to travel to consult with a doctor at another location.

The hope is that regulations continue to stay in place past the pandemic for those who wish to utilize telemedicine options. **lw**



Bryan Telemedicine offers a different way to interact with specialty doctors from afar.



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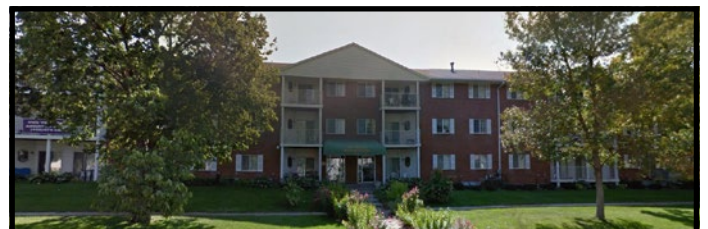


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