

Telehealth Visits Offer Convenience, Better Access During COVID-19 Pandemic

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, telehealth was a useful — if lightly used — tool for pediatric urology providers at Cincinnati Children's. Now, the technology has become indispensable.

In the six months leading up to the pandemic, Cincinnati Children's averaged two telehealth appointments a month for patients with pediatric urology conditions. From March to July 2020, the monthly average was 147.

Providers were able to pivot to the technology quickly because of the hospital's well-established Center for Telehealth, which began in 2014 with a commitment to improving patient access through innovation. The center is growing 30% to 35% annually in patient volume and has offerings in about 40 clinical areas.

"Telehealth is very handy, especially for established patients," says William (Bob) DeFoor Jr., MD, MPH, a pediatric urologist and co-director of the Pediatric Stone Center at Cincinnati Children's. "It's ideal for follow-up appointments for conditions such as voiding dysfunction, enuresis and frequent urinary tract infections, where you're mainly providing education and adjusting medications but a clinical exam is less critical for decision-making."

In the early months of the pandemic, some patients with complex congenital conditions continued to be seen in the clinic setting only. Clinics began opening back up in early summer 2020, but infection prevention measures limited (and continue to limit) the number of patients seen each day. Telehealth appointments are mitigating that problem, helping ensure that every child receives the care they need.

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"A lot of the kids we see have complex medical needs and are wheelchair- or ventilator-dependent. Bringing them into the hospital for a clinic appointment is a significant ordeal, even without the pandemic," DeFoor says. "Some live many hours away, and others just don't need an in-person visit because we can provide the counseling and care they need remotely."

Feedback from families has been positive, although challenges persist for those who do not have reliable internet access. But perhaps the most significant potential barrier to the long-term adoption of telehealth is the possibility that insurance companies won't continue to cover it. "Insurance companies stepped up to provide coverage during the pandemic," DeFoor says. "If reimbursements remain in place, I think telehealth is here to stay."

The department's goal is to continue having about 15% of patient visits via telehealth. This allows adequate in-person access for patients who need a physical consult for optimal care.

Percentage of appointments provided via telehealth vs. in-person

3%

March 2020

88%

April 2020

46%

May 2020

15%

June 2020

14%

July 2020