

## 7 Questions Doctors Like You Have About Telemedicine



Telemedicine is a new trend sweeping the medical field—[analysis firm IHS](#) expects growth of the service will increase from only 350,000 users in 2013 to upward of 7 million by 2018. These numbers mean that it has massive potential for your business because it gives you [options to grow your practice](#) and improve the patient experience.

This isn't to say that telemedicine services are a cure-all or even appropriate in all situations. Many doctors are rightfully skeptical of the true benefits telemedicine offers to patients, practices, and the overall healthcare market. There are serious questions being asked about telemedicine every day by medical practitioners all over the world. Here are a few of the most important to keep in mind.

## 1. How Do Telemedicine Services Actually Work?

This is one of the most foundational questions you can ask about telemedicine, and many doctors are asking this for very good reason. There is little on the market now that can really compete with an in-person consultation, so how can a remote link possibly offer the same experience for your patients, and how can it help you provide the same level of care?

The core technology surrounding telemedicine is a two-way video connection that allows you to see and talk to patients. Since patients aren't there in person, you are relying on a (hopefully) stable and reliable video and audio connection. The benefit for both parties is that it allows you to take an appointment from anywhere, and it allows your patients to bypass most of the wait time for their appointment and forego clearing their schedules to accommodate a longer trip to your office.

## 2. Are Telemedicine Services Reliable?

The main concern many doctors have is that telemedicine services aren't reliable enough to actually make a medical diagnosis. If you've ever used commonly available video chat methods like Skype, you know they can be great communication tools until they aren't.

While you might be able to forgive the occasional issue when talking to a friend or family member on an occasional basis, it's a completely different thing to base part of your business on a problematic service.

Tony Zhao, CEO of communications company Agora.io, shares that concern. He notes that "As more medical practices embed telemedicine services directly into their workflows, they quickly discover the quality and reliability challenges of simply relying on the general Internet for real-time communications. When adopting a telemedicine solution, it's imperative to consider one that is built on an infrastructure of networks, that continuously stabilizes the signal, keeping the visual fidelity high, no matter where your patient is, so what you're seeing is accurate, otherwise you could misdiagnose them."

When choosing a reliable telemedicine system, here are a few key questions to ask:

1. Will my solution work on all smartphones, even lower-end ones?

2. Will it work for patients who may have poorer connections? (i.e., remote, rural, or older patients)
3. Does it have an infrastructure of data centers to rely on, rather than using the general Internet?
4. Does it work even when changing between 3G/4G/Wi-Fi networks?

With telemedicine you are often dealing with older patients and/or remote patients who may not have the best technology or bandwidth, or you're dealing with younger people who expect things to work correctly the first time. Finding a solution that works clearly and reliably is crucial to your telemedicine success.

### 3. What Can You Really Use Telemedicine Services For?

If you are wondering about the actual uses for telemedicine in your practice, you aren't alone. Many doctors wonder about this very idea, especially when it comes to diagnosing difficult diseases or other issues.

Even with the dramatic improvement in the quality and reliability of next-generation video communication technologies, it's important that you take a thoughtful approach to telemedicine in your practice. You want to make sure you are getting the most out of the service, but when starting out and getting used to the benefits and limitations of the service, you may want to limit the types of appointments you have.

A common starting point is to begin by taking relatively easy appointments. Common, non-emergency ailments that are easily diagnosable visually and by talking to the patient are primarily where telemedicine is used. However, these common ailments are also the appointments that are least likely to be made because they typically represent a mild annoyance rather than a full-blown medical issue. When you add up all the different things patients have to miss to go to the doctor, the patient's opportunity cost of each appointment [stands at about \\$43](#), so patients are far more likely to put off or not show for these "inexpensive" problems that can be easily solved with telemedicine.

If a patient can quickly and conveniently pop in to have something looked at and to see if an in-depth exam is needed, the more likely the patient will make a telemedicine appointment.

## 4. How Do I Get Paid When I Take A Telemedicine Meeting?

Beyond the actual type of appointments you are going to take when implementing this type of service, knowing how you are going to get paid is another major concern for many doctors. When a patient comes into your practice, you can request payment on the spot, but that doesn't really apply when they are phoning in their appointment.



While regulations and insurance policies haven't completely caught up with telemedicine, each government service (Medicare, Medicaid, and others) and insurance company has a different way of reimbursing you for your time and has different reimbursement rates.

These rates, while not at the level of in-person visits at the moment, are quickly catching up as the trend toward telemedicine catches on.

Medicare pays for a limited amount of Part B services furnished by a physician, for example, but it also only offers reimbursement when you are treating patients of your practice. It does not cover what is known as direct-to-consumer telemedicine, which involves patients paying a fee for a phone consultation with a doctor. Medicaid benefits vary by state, so there is no good way to cover them all at once, but there are benefits being pushed through on the state level to simplify health care reimbursement across the board.

29 states have pushed through laws that require parity in the reimbursement rate for a telemedicine visit versus an in-person appointment. For the remaining 21 states, telemedicine may not be covered at all or might not be covered at the same rate as an in-person appointment.

While you might view this as a revenue-losing proposition, with the improvement in patient retention and no-show rates that telemedicine offers, along with the increased speed and lower administrative costs to your firm, telemedicine can actually boost efficiency and improve the way you conduct business every day.

## 5. Will Patients Be Turned Off By A More “Hands Off” Telemedicine-Based Approach?



There is a concern that some patients will actually think of telemedicine as a cheaper experience than seeing a doctor in person, which is an important consideration given that improving the patient experience is an excellent way of keeping your patients happy and coming back.

Fortunately, the concern is largely unwarranted. Remember, patients aren't going to be required to use telemedicine services in lieu of going to visit your practice, but it is offered as a more expedited option if they would like. Some patients may try it once (or not at all) and decide they want to continue visits in your office, but many others will use telemedicine more often, particularly the younger generations who prefer to get services delivered on their phone or computer.

## 6. What Are The Technical Limitations Of Telemedicine?

While telemedicine technology is getting much better, not all solutions are equal. Rural, remote, and older patients who often can't physically make it to the office for various reasons (distance,

time, sickness) are beginning to rely more heavily on telemedicine. However, these groups of people are more likely to have weaker and less stable connections than those in population centers and who are typically more “connected” in general. Implementing a telemedicine solution that is made to deal with remote, low- bandwidth patients is crucial to serving this population. If the video patient/doctor visits are unstable and unclear, then the reason to offer this option to the people who rely on it the most is null and void.

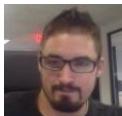
Taking into account the kinds of devices your patients will be connecting with you with is another factor to be mindful of when offering a telemedicine option. This rural, remote, and older population that depends on telemedicine also often doesn't have the latest and greatest devices, which is why offering a telemedicine solution that is able to work on less- powerful devices is another technical factor to be conscious of while developing a proficient telemedicine program.

## 7. What Investment Is Required On My Part?

Telemedicine is an excellent new service, but just like any service, there will be an upfront investment on your part dependent on your current setup and many other factors. The HealthIT.gov site [has a full guide](#) to starting your telemedicine practice, but for most doctors this will be an ongoing process.

Making sure that you have the right infrastructure and tools in place before you begin offering this service is essential. As with any new technology, the first experience will dictate a lot of the ongoing use of telemedicine in your business.

Telemedicine services are expanding rapidly, and they have a lot of potential to really change the way healthcare services are offered globally. It is an affordable and convenient way to see more patients, improve the patient experience, and reduce no-shows, all in one package. That being said, there are some serious questions you are most likely asking about the service itself, and having the answers to those will help you begin to offer this service in best way possible.



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