

Connecting With Care

Convenient, safe Telehealth visits prove to be ideal response to pandemic

By Debra Gelbart

Just months ago, patients were able to visit their doctor or health care provider in person for a routine exam. However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we interact with our doctors and telehealth services, also known as virtual visits, became more important to keep everyone safe.

So, what is telehealth? >>>>>



The best example in this case, it's patient and health care provider interacting with each other through a computer, tablet or smart phone. The great thing about this, the patient does not need to leave the comfort of their home as the doctor can provide care and consultation.

Banner Telehealth does just this by saving patients time, enhancing the convenience of traditional Medicare members like you and preserves precious personal protective equipment (PPE) needed by health care workers caring for COVID-19 patients.

"Protecting our doctors and nurses and preserving PPE was the impetus for this program, established in March when the pandemic began," explained Matthew Anderson, MD, clinical innovation medical director for Banner Health. "We converted the television in many rooms in the COVID unit into a video monitor to make it convenient for patients and staff."

Additionally, Banner Health Network's independent doctors quickly adapted their practices to allow patients to be seen by virtual visit. "We are really proud of the response of Banner Health Network

(BHN) providers," said Ed Clarke, MD, Chief Medical Officer for BHN. "Their strong support for this technology helped meet the needs of our beneficiaries across Arizona."

Weekly teleconferences for these providers kept practices informed of current hospital capacity issues, coding updates and ongoing regulation changes while responding to questions posed by the doctors. "I give them a huge amount of credit for staying engaged during this difficult time. They are certainly unsung heroes for their quick adaption to the situation."



All specialties offer telehealth visits

If a patient is hospitalized, they probably won't be cared for by their primary physician but will probably receive care from a hospitalist. Through telehealth services, our hospitalists can visit remotely with COVID patients, as can pulmonologists, infectious disease physicians and other specialists, Dr. Anderson said.

Banner Health launched telehealth services for hospitalized patients just recently in the spring of 2020, about two weeks after telehealth services for outpatients

was introduced. Outpatient accessibility was launched first because, so little was known about COVID and patients were advised not to come into doctors' offices unless absolutely necessary. By introducing this service, patients were still able to talk with their doctors and discuss any concerns they had without risking their health and the health of their physicians.

"We wanted to ensure continuing care and continuity of care for our patients," Dr. Anderson said. "We established telehealth capability for all our Banner Medical Group, Banner University Medical Group and Banner MD Anderson Cancer Center physicians across all specialties. Appointments could go forward; medications could be easily refilled, and care didn't have to be delayed or deferred."

Telehealth visits extremely popular

According Dr. Anderson, Banner Telehealth services has been immensely popular with patients. "Usage has been across the board with patients, age-wise," Dr. Anderson said, "but we've seen a huge uptick in visits among the Medicare population especially. We estimate that in the first couple months of the program, Banner Health clinicians completed 30,000 online patient visits."

Of course, for some conditions, a health care provider will need

to see you in person. "If you're having abdominal pain, a clinician will need to press on your belly," Dr. Anderson said. "But for many, many situations, a 'virtual visit' is an ideal alternative to an in-person visit."

How to prepare for a telehealth visit

To book a telehealth appointment with your Banner Health provider, many offices offer a "book online" feature, or you can call your doctor's office to book a video appointment.

Your doctor's office will provide specific instructions on how to logon prior to the day and time of your appointment. Prior to your visit, Dr. Anderson recommends downloading and logging into the video call services that you will be using. Banner Health physicians have a video visit service that can be used on desktop computers and laptops that have a camera. During the visit, make sure you're in a room with a strong WIFI signal and that bandwidth isn't being monopolized by other family members.

Dr. Anderson predicts telehealth visits will remain part of physicians' practices even after the pandemic is brought under control. "Telemedicine will never replace in-person visits completely," he said, "but it will remain an important component of medicine going forward."



Meet Pyxir

The Pyx Intelligent Robot can be more than a virtual companion – it might improve your health **By Elise Riley**

In today's hyper-interconnected world, we're all reminded how immediate everything can be with the simple tap of the finger. While we can do our grocery shopping, prepare our taxes and even find a significant other through our phone, the reality is more than ever we're feeling more apart from one another.

That's why there are apps like Pyx Health you can download on your smartphone. This app features a friendly robot named Pyxir – the Pyx Intelligent Robot. The goal of Pyxir is to help people feel less lonely by offering support. He's interactive so he's great at telling jokes, remembers all your stories, and asks questions to find out if you are feeling alone. Pyxir does not judge, so if you need to talk to someone, he's available 24/7.

"Pyxir is the antithesis of what normally happens in health care," said Cindy Jordan, CEO of Pyx Health. "He becomes a friend. He's compassionate and funny."

Bridging the gap

With the help of Pyxir, Pyx Health is working to bridge that gap between technology and human interaction. It turns out that loneliness isn't just heartbreaking, it's also literally breaking our hearts. Research into the health effects of loneliness are eye-opening as social isolation causes an uptick in blood pressure and heart disease. A researcher at Brigham Young University found that social isolation is more damaging to our health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Unlike an appointment with a doctor or nurse, Pyxir is always on and available. He doesn't require appointments or co-pays. He doesn't have to rush you because other patients are waiting.

He simply listens and his responses try to make you feel better.

ANDY can help

Pyxir learns about you through your conversations with him. For example, maybe you're no longer sleeping, or you're missing a beloved friend or pet, or could be experiencing distress at home. When Pyxir "realizes" that someone is in trouble, an ANDY (Authentic Nurturing Dependable Your friend) will then step in to help. ANDYs are real-life trained, nonclinical members of Pyx Health's Compassionate Call Center who call a member, find out what's going on, listen and bring in resources if necessary. In some cases, if it's determined a person needs further help, ANDYs can then try to get that person immediate care. For another, it involved finding resources to get a new and safe place to live.

"This is what's hard for health care to wrap their arms around," Jordan said. "It's the softer side of health. That's what we do. We're treating loneliness through artificial intelligence and human intervention."



MAKE A FRIEND

Pyxir is currently available to all traditional Medicare members and is free to download. Download the Pyx Health app from Google Play or Apple app store. When launching the app, you can "skip" the question that asks about insurance plan. For more information visit www.PyxHealth.com.