Virtual Health Care: Caregiver Guide

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What is a virtual health care appointment?

A virtual health care appointment is a convenient way to have a health care appointment without having to travel to a clinic. As a caregiver, you may be caring for someone who may have difficulty travelling, or needs help with understanding information about their medical condition. This guide will help you and those you care for prepare for and have a virtual health care appointment.

You might use email, a telephone, or a video call for your visit. You and the person you care for can have a visit in the comfort of home, without having to travel or spend money on parking or other expenses.

Is a virtual appointment right for this appointment?

If you are unsure, contact your healthcare provider to talk about the best kind of medical appointment for your loved one’s medical condition.

Virtual health care appointments may work well for:
- Many skin problems
- Minor infections or irritations
- Some mental health issues
- Sexual health questions
- Travel-related care
- Follow-up for tests and screening (e.g. lab tests, blood pressure, etc)

A virtual appointment may not be right for all conditions. The healthcare provider may need to see the patient in person for conditions such as:
- New emergency symptoms (e.g. shortness of breath, loss of vision, weakness) – go to the emergency department
- Injuries to muscles or joints
- Ear pain
- Where a physical exam is needed
Privacy and Consent

The healthcare provider may talk about privacy and confidentiality before the appointment, and ask you if the patient and/or you consent – in other words, if you are OK to continue with the appointment. If they do not do this, make sure that you ask them to do so. They will document consent on the patient file. Note that the patient must consent if the healthcare provider is sharing patient information with a caregiver.

The healthcare provider should also be in a private space where others can’t overhear or see the screen, and must let you know if anyone else is in the room with them. Your choice and privacy are important parts of any medical appointment and especially during a virtual health care appointment.

Types of Health Care Appointments

Email

If you and the patient’s healthcare provider choose to use email:

• Your healthcare provider will send you an email with instructions for setting up an account to email them.
• Use the links in the email to create an account and a password.
• You may receive another email asking you to confirm your account.

Think about the following information to put into your email:

• Your name and relationship to the patient
• A list of the patient’s medications (if this is not a regular doctor)
• Information such as weight, blood pressure readings, or temperature
• A list of symptoms
• Any specific questions

Most email programs also let you add a file, such as a photo. This can be helpful if you are describing something like an injury or a rash. The healthcare provider will send you a response by email, or call you. In some cases, they may ask you to make an in-person appointment or have a video call if they feel they need to see the patient.
Telephone or video call
You might use a regular telephone, a smartphone, a computer or a tablet for the appointment. Note that the call may be coming from a blocked or unknown number.

• If you are using the Internet for a video call, check your Internet connection to ensure that it is working— a wired connection is often better than a wireless connection.
• Download and test any software that your healthcare provider uses for virtual appointments. Some healthcare providers provide technical support to help you get set up before the appointment.
• If you are new to the technology and software, have a test call with a family member or friend, or send a test email or text

Make the most of the appointment:
• If you are using video, find a comfortable, quiet space with good lighting so that you can be seen and heard clearly. If you are having the appointment with the person you are caring for, introduce yourselves and your relationship to each other (e.g. ‘caregiver’) at the beginning of the appointment.

Have the following information with you:
• The patient’s health card – you will need this for all appointments, including ones with the patient’s regular doctor
• A list of any medications and pharmacy information
• Information to share, such as blood pressure readings, temperature or weight
• A list of symptoms
• Any specific questions that you have

If you are not seeing the patient’s regular healthcare provider, it’s good to have:
• A list of current medical conditions, including chronic illnesses and allergies
• The patient’s medical history
I’m not very comfortable using a computer – can I have a phone call instead?
You, the person you care for, and your healthcare provider should discuss the best way for all of you to have the appointment.

We would like to have a video call, but my computer doesn’t have a camera. What can we do?
You might be able to borrow a computer camera or a computer (e.g. a laptop or tablet) from a family member or friend. Some libraries and healthcare providers also lend out devices. If you do borrow a device, make sure that you clear your information before returning it (e.g. clear the history part of the internet browser).

How do I know that our information will be kept private and confidential?
The healthcare provider may talk to you about privacy and consent before the appointment. If they do not, ask them about privacy and consent. The patient’s consent is required if patient information is being shared with a caregiver. They should also let you know if there are any other people in the room with them, and will ask for your consent to go ahead with the appointment. Once the patient or you give consent, they will put this in the patient’s medical record.

What happens if there’s a problem during the appointment – for example, our call gets dropped or I have trouble with the Internet?
If you are in the middle of the appointment and have technology issues, the healthcare provider may suggest switching to another technology – for example, having a phone call instead of a video call. If your phone call is accidently dropped, wait for the healthcare provider to call you back.
Is a virtual appointment right for this appointment?

What if a virtual health care appointment isn’t right for this appointment, or I don’t feel comfortable?

Talk to the healthcare provider about other options. They may be able to see you and the patient in person or refer you to someone else. Sometimes people feel uncomfortable with a virtual health care appointment at first, but become more comfortable over time, and enjoy the convenience. You may wish to try it once before deciding what works best.

This guide is part of a toolkit, and was developed in partnership with patients and caregivers. Thanks to them and to the Queen’s University Human Rights and Equity Office team for reviewing this material. For more information, visit our website.

Learn more
Watch videos, and find tools for virtual health care appointments at: virtualcareresearch.com