Building the Future of Virtual Care: Streamlined, Scalable, Sustainable

Insights from Amwell's 2021 Survey of Health Plans, Hospitals and Health Systems, and Clinicians

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What's Next for Telehealth?

With telehealth here to stay, healthcare leaders are rethinking the role it will play in care delivery and organizational strategy. What factors and priorities are they weighing? What do they envision for the future? We asked them.

In early 2021, as vaccines were rolled out and social distancing restrictions were rolled back, COVID-19 seemed to finally be in the rearview mirror. Just six months later, a new and unpredictable phase of the pandemic is forcing a reassessment of the costs and benefits of COVID precautions and reopening questions about the long-term impact on daily life. Whereas we once spoke of *weathering* or *riding out* the pandemic, experts now talk about *coexisting* with COVID-19. The narrative has changed from one of crisis and resolve to one of adaptation, strategy, and resilience.

Telehealth, which has so closely mirrored the arc of the pandemic, is likewise entering a new phase. The telehealth solutions and stopgaps that were sped into place in 2020 are becoming a permanent fixture of care delivery. Just as people everywhere are reevaluating their plans and priorities in the face of an open-ended pandemic, healthcare leaders are taking stock of their experience with telehealth during the first wave of COVID-19 and are reconsidering the role that virtual care will play in the delivery of care and the long-term strategy of their organization.

To shine a light on this stocktaking and the future direction of virtual care, Amwell and HIMSS Analytics asked senior executives at hospitals, health systems, and health plans around the country about their post-pandemic strategy and their planned investments in telehealth. To keep them honest, we also surveyed frontline clinicians in a broad range of practice settings.

The backdrop

Here's what we knew going into the survey: Telehealth is here to stay. No longer viewed as a Band-Aid, it has established its place as a critical piece of our healthcare system. Telehealth's newfound place is driving, and being driven by, several overlapping dynamics:

- **Stable growth, more use cases.** Though telehealth visits, as a percentage of total healthcare visits, have now plateaued below the levels seen during the first peak of COVID-19, use cases are diversifying rapidly, branching out from standbys like urgent care and behavioral health to primary care, specialty care, wellness programs, and much more.

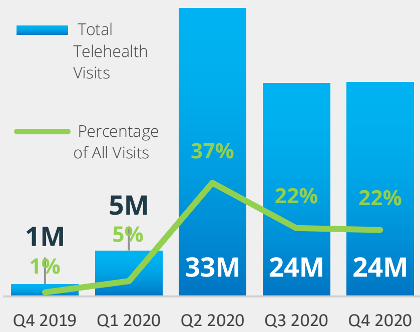
- **Consumer demand.** Patients and consumers have spoken, clearly and consistently: They want more telehealth. Eight in 10 consumers had a positive experience during their last telehealth visit, according to a recent report from the COVID-19 Healthcare Coalition, and nearly three-quarters say a virtual visit would have been preferable to, or interchangeable with, their most recent in-person doctor's appointment. The consumerism that fueled a digital boom in so many other industries has finally arrived in healthcare.

- **Blurred lines.** Digital care on a pandemic scale has accelerated the blurring of roles and the breakdown of silos in the healthcare ecosystem. Value-based care,

Telehealth Is Here to Stay

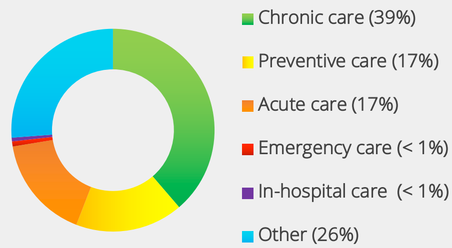
Telehealth Visits

Telehealth claims percentages for the top 100 procedure codes.



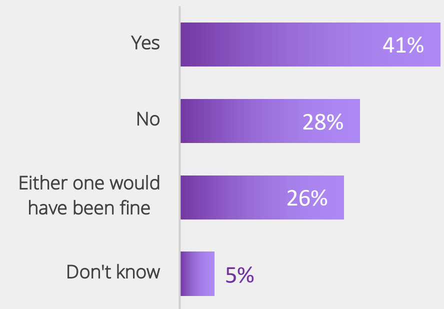
Telehealth Visits by Type of Care

For your most recent telehealth visit, what type of care did you receive?



Preference for Virtual vs. In-Person Care

Thinking about your last telehealth visit, would you have chosen telehealth over an in-person appointment if both required a co-pay?



Source: COVID-19 Healthcare Coalition Telehealth Impact Study

integrated delivery networks, "payviders" (see box on p. 4) — your healthcare provider is now a payer, and your payer now offers virtual primary care and behavioral health services you can access in the App Store.

- **More than just video.** The definition of *telehealth* is blurring, too. Once associated mostly with point-to-point video visits, telehealth is expanding quickly to included automated care, asynchronous care, and hybrid care models that seamlessly span the physical and the digital.

From senior executives to hands-on providers, stakeholders across the healthcare ecosystem are processing all of the above and rethinking their near- and long-term strategy as a result.

Survey highlights

With an eye on these fast-moving changes in our ecosystem, Amwell and HIMSS Analytics surveyed 100 executives at health plans, 102 senior leaders at hospitals and health systems, and 100 frontline clinicians and support staff. Three key trends that emerged from the results:

1. **Telehealth is growing and diversifying, but it's not always smooth sailing.** Despite the consumer enthusiasm and the obvious upside to telehealth in many situations, long-standing barriers to widespread adoption — from clinician resistance to reimbursement uncertainty — remain.

2. **New technology challenges are surfacing.** Integration and interoperability (or lack thereof) and platform "sprawl" are emerging as pressing challenges — especially for hospitals and health systems. Stakeholders across the ecosystem are keen to streamline and systematize their digital infrastructure.

3. **Differing objectives, shared technology needs.** While stakeholders lack a cohesive vision for what the ideal future state looks like, they agree on the core elements that need to be in place: a streamlined experience for patients and providers, interoperability (of platforms as well as data), and a nimble and cohesive infrastructure — ideally including a single platform for telehealth — that can support future growth.

The survey findings — echoing what Amwell is hearing from our clients — suggest that telehealth is entering a critical new phase. As healthcare leaders reflect on the telehealth experience of the past year, their focus is shifting from pandemic-fueled expediency to a "smart-growth" mind-set that prioritizes consolidation, integration, and purposeful central planning.

The Survey at a Glance

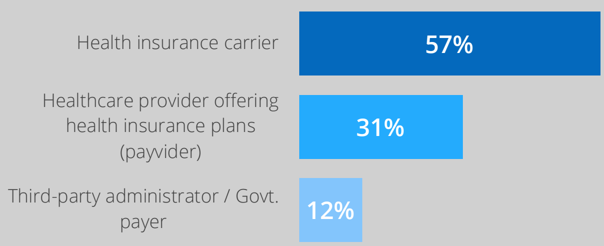
This three-part survey was sponsored by Amwell and fielded online in July 2021 by HIMSS Analytics. Researchers screened and qualified participants to ensure that respondents have significant involvement or influence in decision-making regarding digital technology and investments within their organization (for the payer and health system segments), or are actively providing patient care (for the clinician segment). Amwell was not identified as a sponsor of the research.

HEALTH PLANS

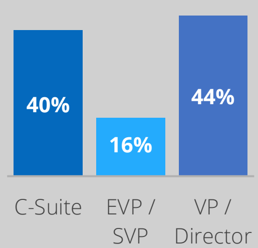
N = 100

Senior leaders across multiple functions (claims, member services, IT/technology, analytics, operations, care management, product management, and provider network management) at organizations ranging in size from under 100,000 members to more than 5 million.

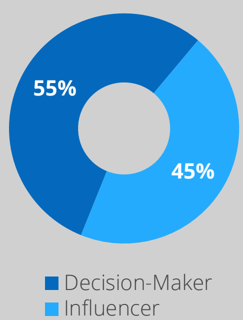
Organization



Job Role



Role in IT Investments

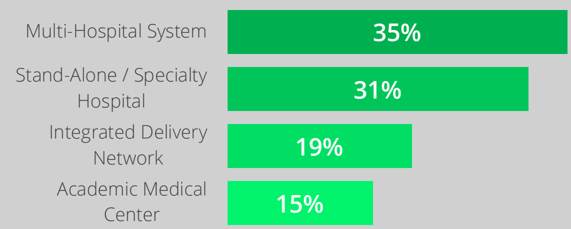


HOSPITALS + HEALTH SYSTEMS

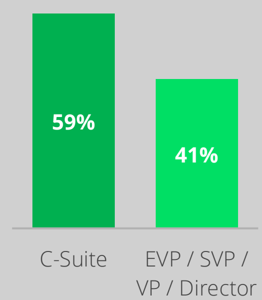
N = 102

Hospital and health system leaders from a broad mix of nonprofit and for-profit organizations in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Organizations ranged in size from less than 250 to more than 2,500 beds, and from less than $250 million to more than $1 billion in annual revenue.

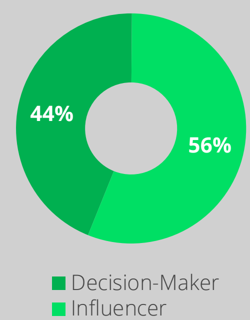
Organization



Job Role



Role in IT Investments

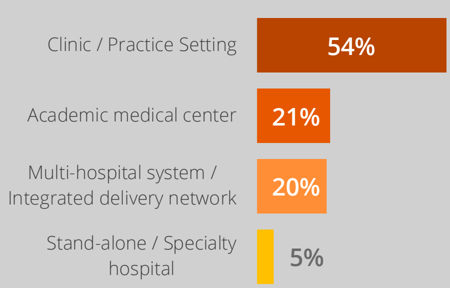


CLINICIANS

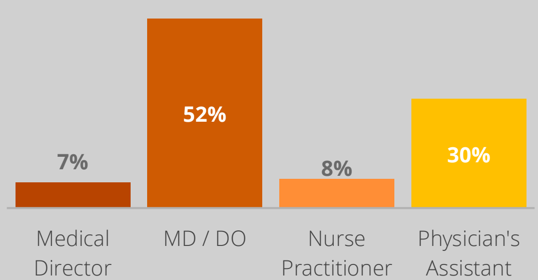
N = 100

Frontline clinicians and support staff who are actively seeing patients and providing care in a variety of specialties. Practice settings covered every region of the country and ranged in size from solo and private practices to large health systems and academic medical centers.

Organization

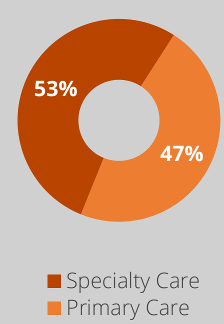


Clinical Role



(Responses under 2% not shown)

Primary Practice Area



Findings: Where We Are Today

Guiding Questions

- How is telehealth adoption and utilization evolving following the first year-plus of the pandemic?
- What barriers stand in the way of the continued expansion of virtual care, and how do those barriers vary by stakeholder?
- Are there technology gaps or challenges that need to be addressed to make virtual care accessible, effective, and sustainable?

Key Takeaways

- Telehealth has stabilized and continues to diversify, though utilization and awareness vary widely across the healthcare ecosystem.
- While stakeholders agree that telehealth is valuable for patients and health plan members, numerous implementation, organizational, and technology barriers threaten to slow the expansion of virtual care.
- Technology challenges — including an excessive number of digital platforms and a lack of interoperability — have emerged as a headwind.

Adoption and Usage

Telehealth continues to grow and diversify, though adoption and usage vary considerably across use cases and stakeholders.

Telehealth adoption and usage, which has stabilized since the first wave of the pandemic, remains way up by historical standards. Virtually all patients have had a telehealth visit by now — and virtually all clinicians have used telehealth to see patients as well. The question is no longer *why telehealth*, or whether people are willing to use it, but rather to understand how usage and behavior is evolving.

Telehealth adoption: the new normal

Although the percentage of clinicians using video visits for all or most of their total visits has declined since the peak of COVID, 94% of all clinicians report using telehealth today — well above pre-pandemic levels.

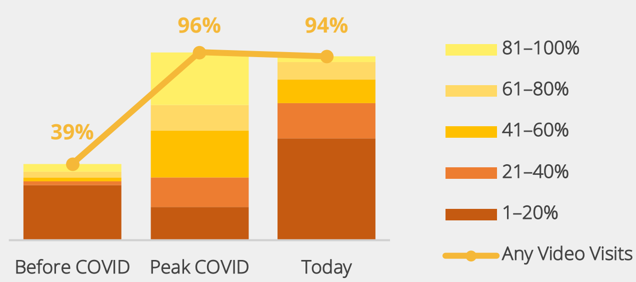
Providers are currently using video visits for a wide range of interactions, including primary care appointments (49%), chronic condition management (66%), and follow-up visits after surgery or hospital stays (52%). Asynchronous touchpoints, including secure messaging via patient portal or SMS/text messaging, is less widespread but still notable, used by roughly one-quarter of clinicians for chronic condition management and follow-up after surgery or inpatient stays.

Clinicians have a generally favorable view of virtual care, citing benefits including improved patient access (82%), increased efficiency (53%), improved patient experience (51%), and a more flexible work-life balance for themselves (43%).

Telehealth Adoption and Utilization Among Clinicians

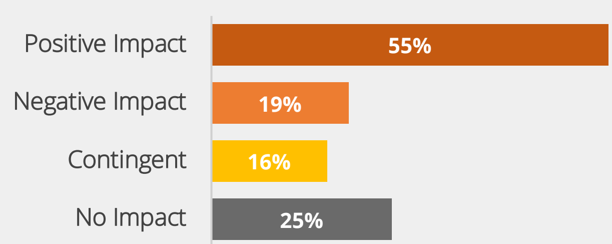
Frequency of Video Visits

What percent of total visits (including in-person visits) did you conduct via video visits during each time period?



Impact of COVID-19 on Future Telehealth Use

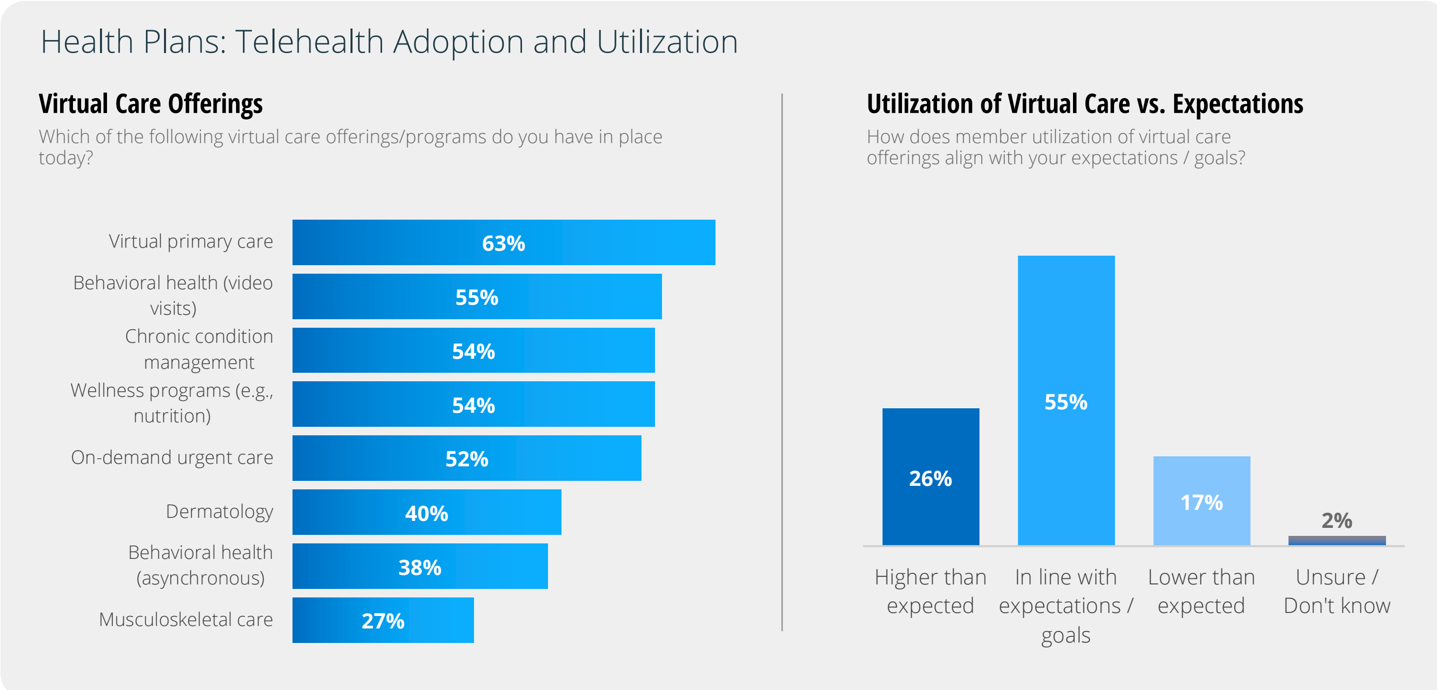
How has the pandemic and return to 'normal' in a post-vaccine world impacted your long-term desire and plans to use telehealth, if at all?



Telehealth Usage By Visit Type and Modality

In which of the following situations or cases do you currently utilize telehealth with your patients, at least some of the time, using any of the below modalities?

	Chronic condition management	Prescription refills	Surgical or inpatient follow-up	Primary care	Urgent care	Acute care / specialty consults	Musculo-skeletal care	Behavioral health	Other outpatient visit
Video	66%	36%	52%	49%	39%	40%	35%	36%	57%
Phone	53%	57%	42%	38%	27%	26%	28%	25%	42%
Patient Portal	27%	45%	22%	19%	14%	15%	17%	13%	20%
Text	8%	9%	9%	6%	9%	7%	8%	8%	7%



Among health plans, meanwhile, most organizations have one or more virtual care offerings in place today. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the health plan leaders surveyed reporting having virtual primary care in place, for instance. Adoption and utilization among their membership appears to be uneven, however: Just over one-quarter of health plan leaders (26%) say member utilization of virtual care offerings exceeds their expectations — and 1 in 6 say it has failed to meet their expectations.

Barriers to further expansion of virtual care

Stakeholders agree that telehealth has had a positive impact, but several important barriers to widespread adoption remain. Nearly half of all health plan leaders cite a confusing member experience (46%) and a lack of awareness among members of virtual care offerings (40%) as the most common barriers to greater utilization among members.

By contrast, a lack of patient awareness of telehealth is a relative nonfactor among hospitals and health systems. Health system leaders cite staff resources (41%); uncertainty around reimbursement (39%); and security, privacy, or compliance risks (35%) as top barriers to delivering virtual care. Clinician resistance (33%) is also near the top of the list.

Despite their general willingness and intention to continue using telehealth, the frontline clinicians we surveyed confirm the perception among hospital and health system leaders that providers remain hesitant about widespread telehealth adoption. Clinicians cite a preference for in-person visits (51%), uncertainty around reimbursement (38%), and questions about clinical appropriateness (34%) as the main reasons inhibiting them from expanding virtual care.

Common Barriers to Delivering Virtual Care

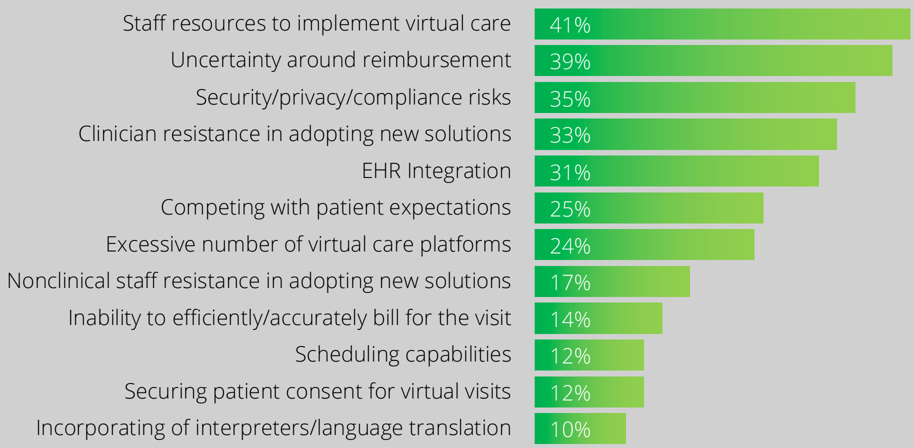
Barriers ranked in the top 3 by each segment of survey respondents

Health Plans

What are the most significant barriers to driving greater member utilization of virtual care?

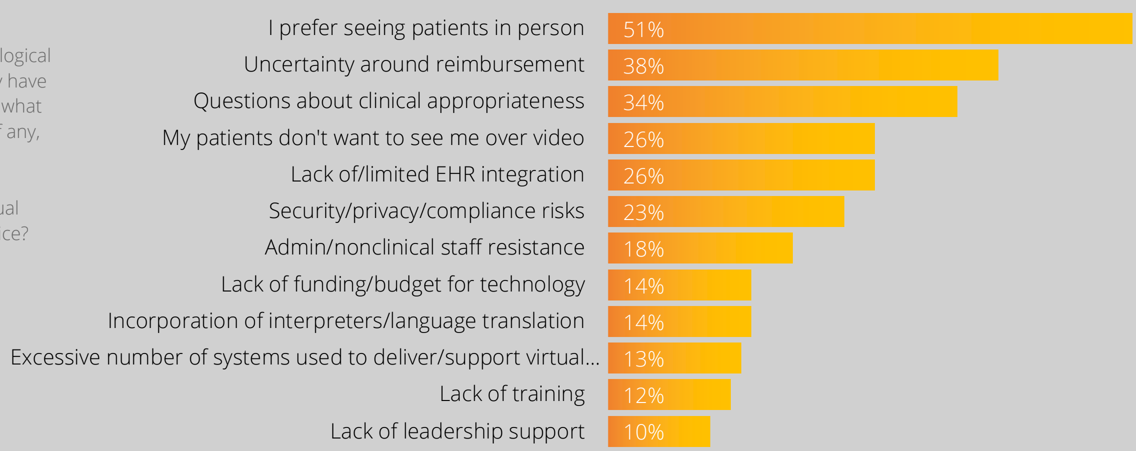
Hospitals and Health Systems

What are your organization's most significant barriers to delivering virtual care?



Clinicians

Aside from any technical / technological concerns you may have using virtual care, what current barriers, if any, are inhibiting use and/or further integration of virtual care in your practice?



Technology challenges — including an excessive number of digital care platforms and a lack of interoperability — have emerged as important pain points.

Across all three survey segments, technology limitations were a common thread. At least one-quarter of the respondents in each segment cited the following as barriers to delivering virtual care:

- Excessive number of systems used to deliver or support virtual care
- EHR integration (lack of, or limited, integration)
- Security, privacy, or compliance risks
- Lack of interoperability or data-sharing
- Inability to leverage data collected from remote patient monitoring (RPM) devices

Two themes in particular rise to the surface: an excessive number of platforms used for digital care and a lack of interoperability.

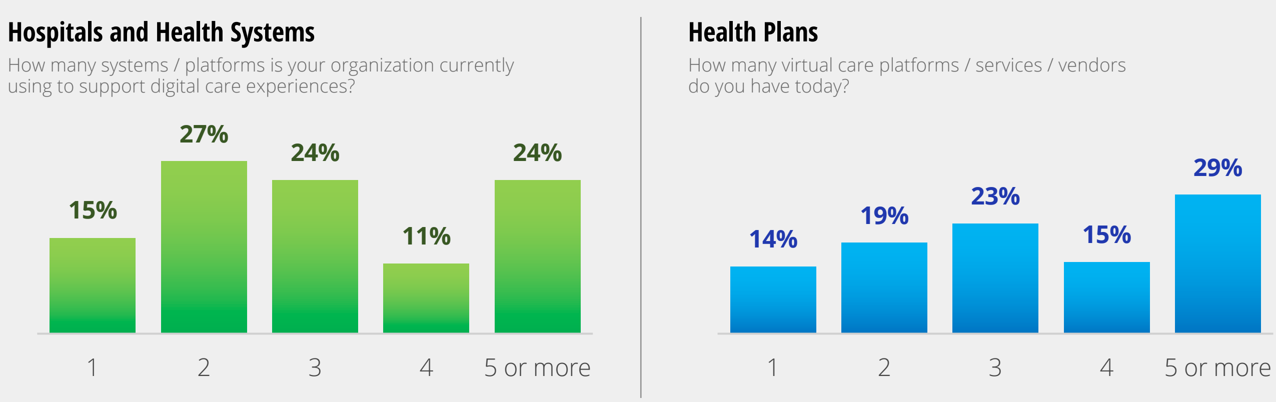
Excessive number of virtual care platforms

The majority of health plans and providers are using at least three platforms/systems for virtual or digital care — and more than one-quarter have five or more platforms in place. This type of platform "sprawl" is especially acute at hospitals and health systems, larger institutions in particular. Roughly 1 in 6 integrated delivery networks and 1 in 5 academic medical centers reported using eight or more platforms for digital care experiences.

Integration and interoperability

Lack of integration was called out as a pain point by all three respondent groups (see box on previous page). Nearly 1 in 4 clinicians say virtual care systems and workflows are not at all or hardly integrated with their organization's existing systems.

Number of Platforms in Use for Virtual and Digital Care



Findings: Future State

Guiding Questions

- How are healthcare stakeholders incorporating virtual care into their organizational strategy and planning?
- How are organizational objectives driving or influencing future investment in virtual care?
- What technology, functionality, or infrastructure do stakeholders deem most necessary to the successful expansion of digital care delivery?

Key Takeaways

- Most decision-makers intend to increase their investment in virtual care over the next 2 years and beyond.
- Though stakeholders share several broad objectives for virtual care (such as improving patient/member access and experience), priorities vary across health plans, hospitals and health systems, and clinicians.
- Healthcare providers juggling multiple telehealth platforms are keen to consolidate and integrate their virtual care technology and experiences.

Stakeholders have seen the potential of telehealth and are reassessing their objectives, priorities, and needs for the future.

Whatever reservations they may have about virtual care, clinicians are feeling positive about the future and the potential of telehealth. More than half of the clinicians surveyed (55%) say the pandemic has positively impacted their long-term desire to use telehealth, and they predict their current telehealth usage will stay the same or increase in the next three years.

Likewise, more than half of all hospital and health system leaders (56%) are planning to increase their investment in telehealth solutions and virtual care over the next two years. Staff training and support, telehealth for specialty care, and hospital at home capabilities were all among the top needs cited by the respondents.

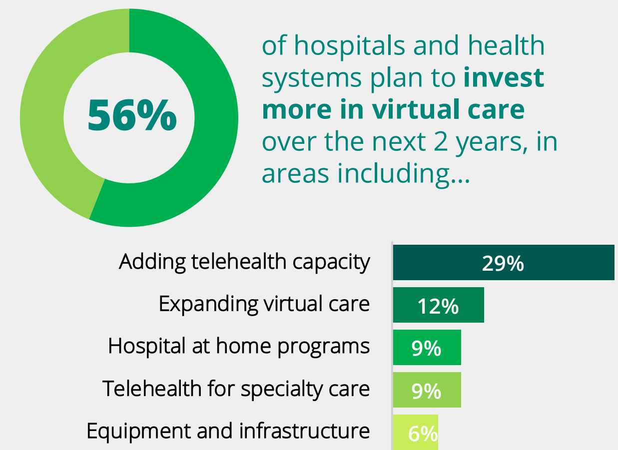
Among health plans, meanwhile, the majority of those who do not have already have virtual care offerings in place (such as virtual primary care, live behavioral health visits, chronic condition management, and musculoskeletal care) intend to add them in the next 24 months — and all but a few of the remaining respondents expect to consider those benefits eventually.

Priorities and objectives

What's driving these investments? What goals are they working toward? The perceived benefits and desired outcomes associated with virtual care varied considerably by stakeholder.

Hospitals and Health Systems: Virtual Care Strategy

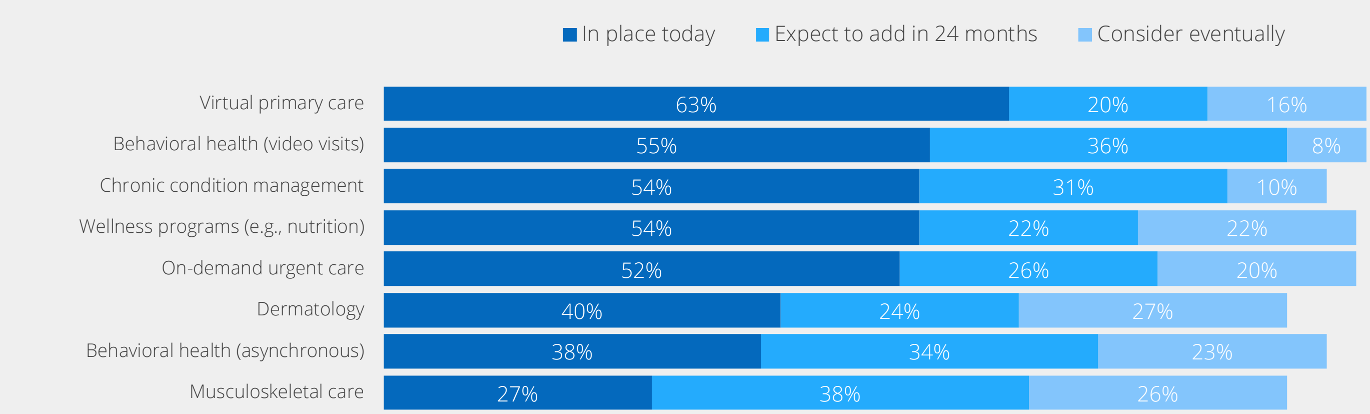
When thinking of virtual care, what is your organization's anticipated strategy post pandemic, in the next two years or so?



As we've seen (see box on p. 6), a majority of clinicians report that their experience with virtual care during the pandemic has positively impacted their desire and their plans to use telehealth moving forward. Among those who expressed a positive impact, by far the most cited benefit to using virtual care is the ability to increase access for patients, followed by increased efficiency and an improved patient experience. Clinicians who felt their practice had been positively impacted

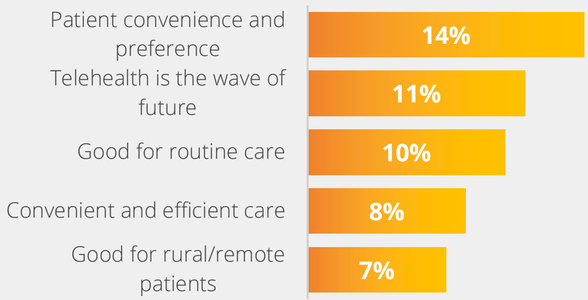
Health Plans: Planned Investments in Virtual Care

When thinking of your members' future needs/expectations regarding virtual care, when do you expect to implement each of the following offerings?



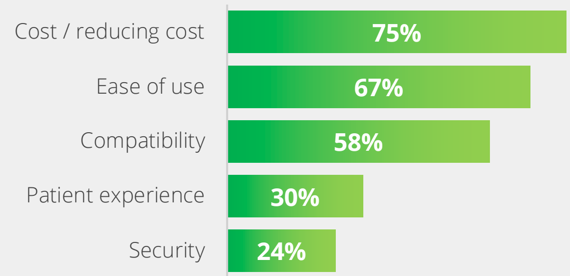
Clinicians: Benefits of Increasing Telehealth Use

(Open-ended response)



Hospitals and Health Systems: Purchasing Drivers

What are the top three drivers in your decision-making process when it comes to technology purchases of a digital care system provider?



by their telehealth experience during COVID-19 focused on convenience and efficiency — for both patient and provider:

> *Patients have responded very positively to telehealth and have come to appreciate its convenience.*

> *Telehealth definitely has a role in the future of outpatient visits. It is convenient for all parties and will only become more streamlined as we become more comfortable with it.*

> *I believe telehealth will become standard practice across many specialties. There are times where its use is appropriate and more convenient for the patient.*

A majority of hospitals and health system leaders, echoing the views of clinicians, report that patient satisfaction scores (69%), provider adoption and satisfaction (65%), improved access to care (59%), and the ease of implementing and using technology are all KPIs for current telehealth technology.

However, while ease of use and patient experience rate high on the list of factors influencing technology purchasing decisions, hospital and health system leaders cite cost reduction and compatibility as critical factors as well.

Health plan leaders report that visit volumes (66%), member satisfaction scores (63%), improved outcomes (63%) and access to care (60%), provider adoption and satisfaction (49%), and ROI and operational efficiency (46%) are the top objectives/KPIs currently being used to measure telehealth technology. These KPIs closely mirror the factors driving investment in technology among health plans. Senior health plan leaders overwhelmingly agree on the main priorities and objectives behind their investments, with more than three-quarters citing improving patient outcomes and access to care, lowering costs and driving ROI, and streamlining the member experience as a "very" or "extremely" high priority for technology investment decisions.

Health Plans: Purchasing Drivers

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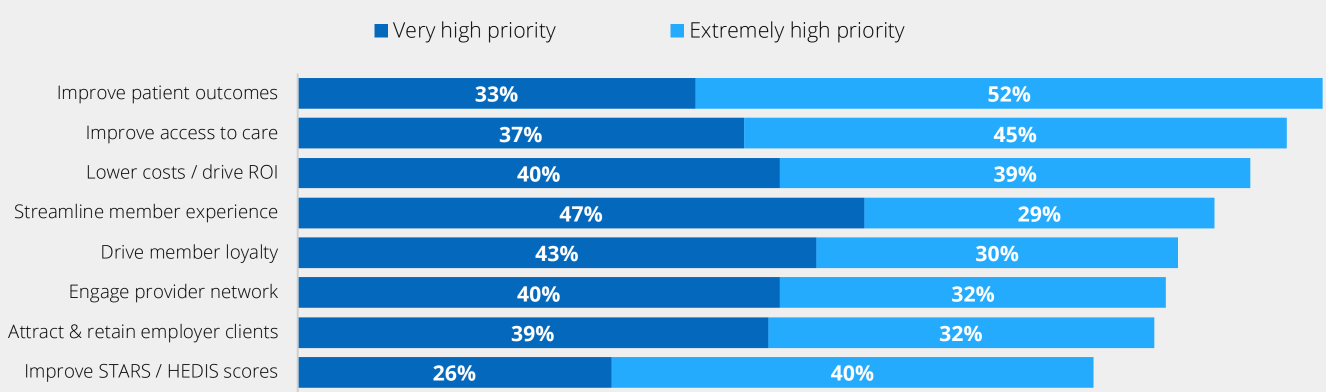


Technology Needs

Regardless of their specific objectives for virtual care, stakeholders share many technology pain points and see a need for streamlined, integrated solutions.

As they reassess their long-term objectives and the potential of virtual care, stakeholders are also assessing the gaps in their existing technology and redrafting their wish lists of tools and features for telehealth.

Technology needs

Clinicians identified quality video connections as the top feature necessary for a successful telehealth experience. Clinicians also emphasize the importance of integrating telehealth in existing workflows and systems. Two-thirds cite the following features as "very" or "extremely" impactful:

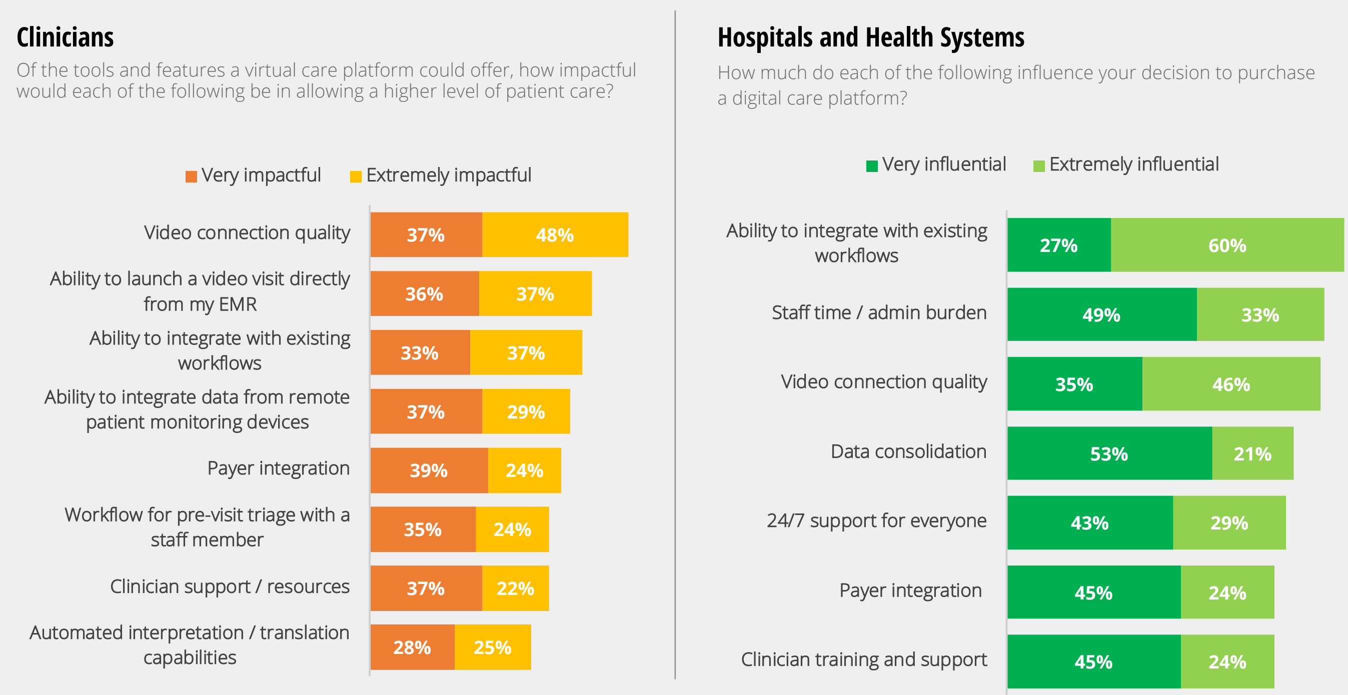
- Launch a video visit from the EHR (73%)
- Integrate with existing workflows, systems, patient portals, etc. (70%)
- Integrate data from remote patient monitoring devices (66%)
- Payer integration (63%)

For their part, hospitals and health systems wish to simplify and streamline their telehealth technology, citing cost reduction, ease of use, and compatibility as their top purchasing drivers. More than 80% of the respondents said the ability to integrate with existing workflows, fast video connections, and reducing admin burden were "very" or "extremely" important factors in telehealth technology investments.

Platform consolidation

For telehealth, the vast majority of hospitals and health systems want to move toward a single integrated platform for telehealth. Among the decision-makers and influencers currently using two or more platforms, 77% said moving toward a single, secure platform that is fully integrated with other systems (such as the EHR and compliance systems) is "very" or "extremely" important for their organization, citing benefits such as streamlined implementation, training, vendor management, and data collection.

Technology 'Wish Lists' for Virtual Care



Clinicians agree that moving toward a fully integrated telehealth platform would be beneficial. Over 80% of providers believe investing in a fully integrated virtual or hybrid care system would have a positive impact on clinical outcomes and patient experiences — and roughly one-third said it would have a "very" or "extremely" positive impact.

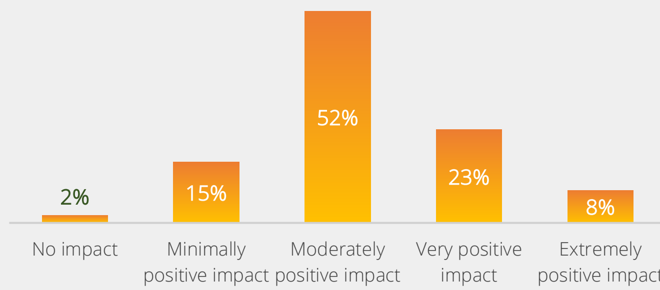
Just 14% of health plans use just one virtual care platform or service today, while nearly 30% say moving to one platform would be ideal. Organizations that are currently using 3 to 4 platforms are especially eager to consolidate. By contrast, health plans with 5 or more platforms today tend to be satisfied with the number of platforms they have in place. Health plans with a larger number of platforms may view that as a wider, more sophisticated virtual care offering for their members, rather than a source of complexity and integration challenges — a notable difference from hospitals and health systems.

While the number of platforms is less of a pain point for health plans than for providers, health plan leaders still express a strong wish for greater interoperability and data-sharing across platforms. Roughly three-quarters of all respondents say that access to virtual care member data and insights through a single digital platform would streamline the member experience (a top challenge they face today), as well as improve patient outcomes and support the development of innovative models of care coordination and delivery.

Benefits of a Single Platform

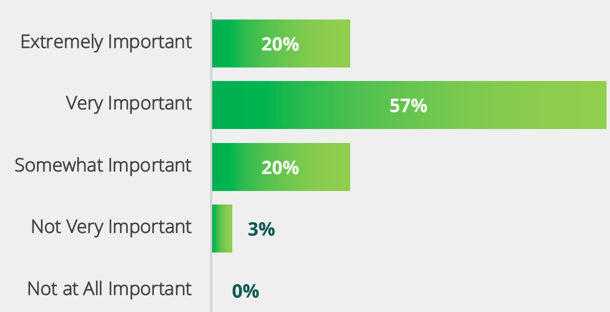
Clinicians

If your organization were to invest in fully integrating virtual and/or hybrid care in your processes, workflows, etc., how much of an impact do you believe it would have on clinical outcomes and patient experience?



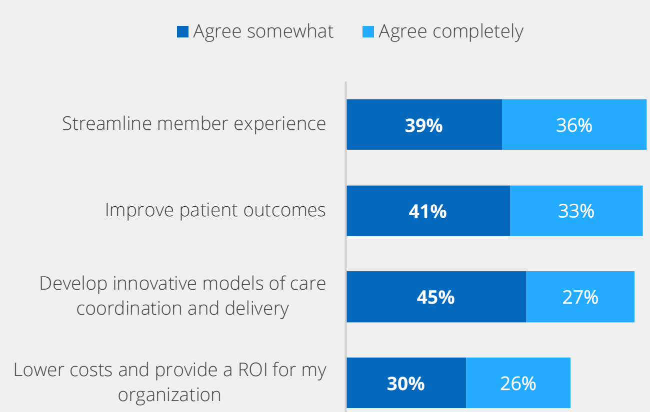
Hospitals and Health Systems:

How important is it for your organization to have the ability to use a fully integrated single telehealth platform, which allows for a regulatory compliant data exchange and digital care services across your organization's ecosystem?



Health Plans

How would you rate your level of agreement with the following statement? Access to virtual care member data and insights through a single digital platform offers the ability to...



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From Sprawl to Smart Growth

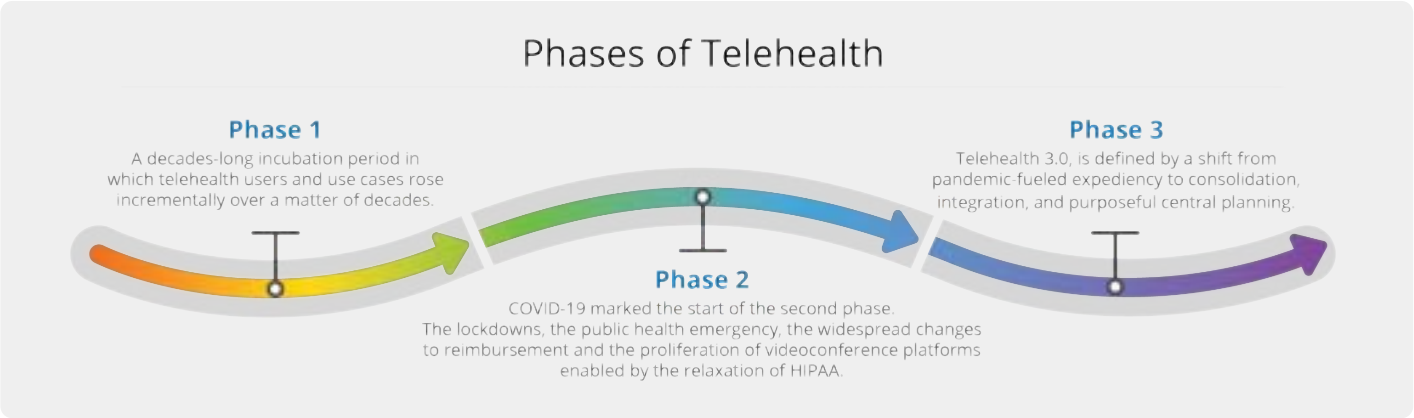
Telehealth is entering its third phase. The first was a decades-long incubation period in which telehealth users and use cases rose incrementally over a matter of decades. COVID-19 marked the start of the second phase. The lockdowns, the public health emergency, the reimbursement mandates, the proliferation of videoconference platforms enabled by the relaxation of HIPAA enforcement — all of it made for a sudden and spectacular increase in adoption.

For many patients and providers, over long stretches of 2020, telehealth was the only game in town. It proved to be a lifeline, but for many organizations that meant launching and scaling telehealth solutions as quickly as possible to meet the overwhelming need. The focus was on speed, not strategy. The pandemic didn't leave much room for long-range planning, and now that the dust is beginning to settle, healthcare decision-makers are taking stock of the systems and solutions that have sprung up around them.

TELEHEALTH 3.0 IS DEFINED BY A SHIFT FROM PANDEMIC-FUELED EXPEDIENCY TO CONSOLIDATION, INTEGRATION, AND PURPOSEFUL CENTRAL PLANNING — A SHIFT FROM SPRAWL TO SMART GROWTH.

Here's what they're seeing: Multiple platforms or systems for digital care are now in place — not only for telehealth, but also for patient engagement, remote patient monitoring, and more — but they tend live in silos. Organizations are struggling to integrate virtual care into aging or patchwork systems, which often fail to communicate with one another.

From the vantage point of the senior decision-makers represented in this survey, telehealth in 2020 was like a boomtown that has experienced unexpected and unchecked growth. Suddenly filled with newcomers who flocked there out of necessity or opportunity, the city is now realizing that it needs better infrastructure, new roads and transit hubs, a sustainable revenue base, livable spaces, and better broadband. The third phase of telehealth, which has been called Telehealth 3.0, is defined by a shift from pandemic-fueled expediency to consolidation, integration, and purposeful central planning — a shift from sprawl to smart growth.[1]



In telehealth as in any vibrant city, not every stakeholder will agree on the optimal end state. As the survey results show, some corners of the healthcare ecosystem will prioritize convenience and ease of use, while others will naturally focus on vendor consolidation, cost reduction, and ROI. That said, there are three key themes and focus areas — at three distinct levels — that emerged from our research that we believe will define this new phase for telehealth:

USERS

Patient/provider experience

Ensuring ease of use and a seamless experience for patients and providers, to encourage the widespread adoption that will be necessary to achieve organizational objectives (e.g., better patient outcomes, lower costs).

PLATFORMS / SYSTEMS

Integration and interoperability

Integrating siloed tools and technology, as well as previously siloed care delivery models (physical, virtual, and automated/digital,) – in terms of workflow, data-sharing, patient and provider experience, and more.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Sustainability and scale

Revisiting digital infrastructure — not just platforms and systems, but how those platforms and systems are connected and supported at the enterprise level — to ensure that healthcare organizations can scale telehealth sustainably, future-proof their digital infrastructure, and respond nimbly to future challenges and opportunities.

To realize the potential of digital care delivery in the wake of the COVID-19 experience, healthcare organizations need to develop a cohesive, holistic strategy that spans all three levels and plan their investments and next steps accordingly

Sources

[1] KLAS Research, Telehealth Performance 2020: Rapid Telehealth Uptake Is a COVID Silver Lining; Kirshner et al., A CFO's guide to telehealth and virtual visits, Optum.com.