

3 imperatives to leverage telehealth against COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 around the world is resulting in a surge of diagnosed cases and a significant strain on hospitals' capacity. Telehealth is uniquely positioned to help control the spread of infection and manage high capacity rates.

Secure messaging and virtual visits can act as “tele-triage” methods to help hospitals manage capacity. Triage keeps the worried well and mild cases out of hospitals to prevent the spread of infection. Using chatbots or other forms of automated symptom checkers, you can help patients understand their symptoms and provide them with a treatment plan to increase clinician capacity with faster throughput. Following up with virtual visits, clinicians can supply necessary care to mild cases at a distance, protecting clinicians from additional interactions that put them at risk of exposure and allowing them to focus their time and resources on critical cases in the hospital.

Here are 3 imperatives to help you leverage telehealth against COVID-19.

- ▶ **1 Actively promote telehealth services to patients**
- Patients may not even be aware of the opportunity to do virtual visits. Only 8% of patients have ever used telehealth services, according to Amwell. To increase awareness:
- Advertise virtual visit options prominently on your website's main page
 - Push notifications through emails, texts, social media, and any other direct-to-patient channels
 - Encourage (and potentially mandate) that patients who want to schedule an in-person visit should try a virtual visit first
 - Use chatbots and other forms of automated symptoms checking to assess patient symptoms and direct the patient to the best care option
 - Support patients to use telehealth technology such as apps, including installation assistance

- ▶ **2 Ensure the necessary technology is working properly**
- An unanticipated increase in virtual visits could strain IT systems, requiring additional investments of time and resources in the midst of an outbreak. To prevent problems you should:
- Assess the status of necessary licenses
 - Check bandwidth capacity and connectivity levels
 - Update chatbot algorithms and automated responses in accordance with relevant guidelines as understanding about the pandemic evolves
 - Make sure all laptops, tablets, portable carts, and other hardware are in working condition

- ▶ **3 Support frontline clinicians**
- An influx of patients might mean that clinicians have to take on additional visits—or even try a virtual visit for the first time. To ensure your clinicians feel prepared you should:
- Offer training in advance of the visit for first-timers and as a refresh for clinicians who don't normally do virtual visits
 - Plan to provide in-the-moment support in case any technology issues arise during the virtual visit