

Kaiser Permanente Research Roundup: Research Summaries for Policy Leaders

Patient Differences in Primary Care and Telehealth Use During the Pandemic

[Patient Factors Associated with Use of Adult Primary Care and Virtual Visits During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) / Medical Care / Ritzwoller, et al. / March 9, 2023



Telehealth use expanded rapidly during the pandemic, as policymakers increased the types of covered services, removed geographic restrictions on telehealth visits, and allowed more providers to offer telehealth services. Federal policymakers recently extended many Medicare telehealth flexibilities for 2 years, but then they must determine whether to extend them further. State-level decision-makers also are considering whether to extend or change telehealth flexibilities.

Kaiser Permanente has been investing in and expanding our use of telehealth for many years, and our members can choose an in-person or telehealth visit when scheduling an appointment. Kaiser Permanente researchers recently published a study that explores questions of interest to policy audiences:

- **How did the pandemic affect adults' use of primary care?**
- **How did virtual care use for primary care differ by patient characteristics**, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, outpatient copays, distance to a primary care clinic, and local socioeconomic characteristics?

2023 Article in Medical Care

Adding to existing research on this topic, Kaiser Permanente researchers recently leveraged our health system's extensive electronic health record of secure, anonymized data to explore

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factors associated with telehealth use for adult primary care. They analyzed records from 1,632,522 adult patients within the Kaiser Permanente system in the Denver/Boulder, Atlanta, and Washington, DC tri-state areas from January 2020 through June 2021. Key findings:

- Looking at both in-person and telehealth visits:
 - Patients who were older, female, had more pre-existing illnesses, or were Black or Hispanic/Latino were more likely to use primary care services during this time.
 - Patients who had higher cost-sharing were less likely to use primary care.
- **For adults who used primary care services during this period, older adults, and Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino adults were less likely to use telehealth to access primary care than other adults**

Policy Opportunities

No single study can suggest the full range of policy needs and opportunities. Based on existing research and internal discussions among Kaiser Permanente telehealth leaders, we recommend several avenues for improving telehealth access and care:

Promote digital inclusion: Ensure that all individuals and communities can access and use telehealth offerings.

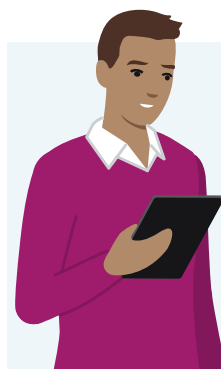
- **Improve access to video-based visits:** Everyone should be able to choose the type of visit that works best for their specific needs. Policies could advance this goal by bolstering basic internet infrastructure and making broadband and internet-connected devices more affordable.
- **Support access to phone visits:** Video visits require a strong internet connection, a video-enabled device, and digital literacy to set up the video call. Some patients would be

unable to access a video visit or face significant challenges. Even with access to video technology, some patients may prefer a phone visit.

- **Support outreach and education:** Everyone should have the knowledge and support needed to navigate digital platforms that link patients to telehealth services. Digital navigators and skill development programs in a variety of languages could help address this need.

Incorporate telehealth into measures of health care quality and access: As telehealth shifts health care delivery, ensure that measures address these changes.

- **Incorporate telehealth quality standards into overall care quality measurement:** Quality and outcome measures for in-person and telehealth services should be aligned, so that digital health is held to the same high standards for quality, safety, patient satisfaction, clinical outcomes, and health equity as in-person care. Digital health research can inform telehealth guidelines, reimbursement policies, and approaches for monitoring and incentivizing excellent care.
- **Consider impacts on access:** When telehealth broadens access to high-quality, equitable care, consider approaches to better incorporate telehealth into network adequacy evaluation frameworks.



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