

The doctor will (virtually) see you now

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(HealthDay)—Telemedicine is playing an ever-expanding role in the U.S. health care landscape.

Among the reasons: a growing national shortage of doctors, both [primary care](#) and, in certain areas, specialists. And one-quarter of the population lives in rural areas without easy access to care.

So, [telemedicine](#) has stepped in to help fill the gap. In fact, more than 10 million Americans now use it every year.

Telemedicine, or telehealth, are terms for virtual office visits—video chats made through your smartphone, tablet or computer, sometimes with no waiting at all. You can see and speak with a doctor using real-time audio and video technology. Services can vary from getting a diagnosis and a prescription for minor medical issues, to ongoing monitoring of chronic conditions—especially helpful to older adults.

Some health insurance providers now offer telehealth as part of some of their plans. It's usually for a fee that's lower than a co-pay or, if you have a high deductible, less than you'd pay out of pocket for an office visit.

A study published in the journal *Health Affairs* found that the most common virtual visits were for acute respiratory problems, [urinary tract infections](#) and skin complaints. Telemedicine can be very helpful with dermatology problems because this specialty has a shortage of doctors.

Telemedicine for [mental health care](#) is also growing. It helps people stick with their treatment plan and removes the potential stigma of going to a mental health clinic—and it can be as effective as face-to-face appointments, studies have shown.

More information: You can learn more about telemedicine and find more resources at the U.S. National Institutes of Health's [National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering](#).

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