

Virtual health care has limited benefits, study finds

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Telehealth can save money and health care resources by enabling virtual evaluation and treatment, but only when it's used for certain types of diseases, according to a new study from The University of Texas at

Austin.

Researchers at the McCombs School of Business found telehealth did not significantly reduce costs or the number of future visits to emergency rooms or specialists for circulatory, respiratory and [infectious diseases](#).

The findings have practical implications for fostering telehealth use in a value-based health care environment.

"People believed that telehealth would be the next big thing, the future of health care," said Indranil Bardhan, a professor of information, risk and operations management. "But our [research](#) shows that its impact is not as straightforward as people might think. It's more nuanced."

The study is published in *Information Systems Research*.

Bardhan and his co-authors, Sezgin Ayabakan of Temple University and Zhiqiang (Eric) Zheng of The University of Texas at Dallas, examined telehealth through the theory of process virtualization: replacing physical interactions with virtual ones.

Based on a study of patient visits across all hospital-based outpatient clinics in Maryland from 2012 to 2021, they found virtual telehealth visits reduced the overall number of future outpatient visits within 30 days of a telehealth encounter by 14%, saving \$239 in total outpatient costs per patient.

Behavioral health, [metabolic disorders](#), dermatology and [musculoskeletal disorders](#) saw the greatest positive impacts from telehealth.

But for diseases of the heart or lung, or those involving infection, symptoms are more difficult for patients to communicate and for

doctors to observe over video. These limitations resulted in no benefit from virtual care, Bardhan said.

He hopes the research can help enable more efficient use of resources by encouraging [health care professionals](#) to focus telehealth on treating specific disease types and conditions where it can do the most good.

"The effectiveness of telehealth is really a function of the type of disease that it is used to treat," he said.

More information: Sezgin Ayabakan et al, Impact of Telehealth and Process Virtualization on Healthcare Utilization, *Information Systems Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1287/isre.2023.1220](https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.2023.1220)

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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