HOW TO USE VIRTUAL CARE WITH YOUR PATIENTS

Ontario's doctors are doing everything they can to continue to care for their patients during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Technology can help you care for patients who don't need to be seen in person. They may require initial screening because they are worried that they may have been exposed to the virus, or you may be monitoring patients who already have the COVID-19 virus and are quarantined at home. For your other patients, you may want to limit their exposure to your practice during this recommended self-isolation period. Many of these patients can be seen remotely, using virtual visits.

WHAT IS VIRTUAL CARE?

Virtual care includes all the ways health care providers can interact remotely with their patients. These interactions are often referred to as virtual visits. The most common ways used to conduct a virtual visit to treat patients in Ontario is through a secure technology. A common example is offered by the Ontario Telemedicine Network, but providers also use third party solution providers and technologies, video (e.g., Zoom, Skype, FaceTime), phone, and text messaging to communicate with patients. The most important aspect when using these technologies is to obtain the patient's consent in advance.

HOW CAN I BILL FOR VIRTUAL CARE?

As of March 14, 2020, the Ontario Ministry of Health and the OMA agreed on temporary telephone and video fee codes for family physicians and specialists to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread by keeping people at home and out of doctors' offices. Please visit the OMA virtual care page for more information on the temporary K codes:

- K080 (virtual minor assessment or equivalent)
- K081 (virtual intermediate assessment or equivalent)
- K082 (mental health and counselling or equivalent)
- K083 (specialist)

The OMA website also has more information on the Ontario Virtual Care Program codes and Frequently Asked Questions.

Any direct-to-patient telephone, telemedicine and video platforms can now be used as the work is remunerated with the new fee codes, rather than the platform you choose. This allows rapid and wide scaling of care that works best in your area.

HOW CAN I CHOOSE WHICH VIRTUAL CARE TOOLS TO USE?

When choosing a virtual care tool, consider how easy the technology is for you to use, how easy it is for patients to use, and how the technology can help you keep patient information private and secure. You must also consider that you must record the work in your medical record. Additional technical guidance may be provided by the Ministry to inform technology selection. OntarioMD, a subsidiary of the OMA, has created a curated list of virtual care tools, updated regularly.

Consider the right type of contact, for the right patient, at the right time, for the right problem. Video conferencing and phone calls are payable under the fee codes above, but email and texts to patients may also be useful for care, even if not discretely funded.

To protect your privacy and your time, you should create an email address to communicate with patients instead of using your personal email address. Similarly, you can set up your phone so that the number displays as an unknown number to your patients. Tell your patients that your number will appear that way and that they should answer your called at the scheduled time for the call. If you need help with how to set yourself up for virtual visits, contact support@ontariomd.com.

OntarioMD has categorized virtual care tools by type and has curated the list of products under each one:

- Ontario Telemedicine Network tools and information
- Video visit platforms for medical care
- Technologies not traditionally used in health care
- Direct-to-patient virtual and digital tools for practice
- Virtual clinics available to the public
- OntarioMD-certified EMRs (electronic medical records)
- Other resources

HOW DO I TELL MY PATIENTS ABOUT VIRTUAL CARE?

Many of your patients have smartphones and already use video technologies. Other patients are likely to have a home phone and would be comfortable with a visit or follow up by phone. Regardless of which of these technologies they use, they will have to consent to use them for the provision of care.

Some virtual care technologies handle consent from the patient upon sign-up. Others that may be used in health care recommend that you obtain informed consent from the patient before you use them. If you choose a product that is not typically used in health care, then you should ask patients for their consent.

Standard consent language vetted by OMA and OntarioMD legal teams and the CMPA has been created to make this easier. OMA Legal has prepared a short consent statement to initiate a virtual care patient encounter which has also been vetted by the CMPA. It can be read aloud to your patient:

"Virtual Care has some inherent privacy and security risks that your health information may be intercepted or unintentionally disclosed. We want to make sure you understand this before we proceed. In order to improve privacy and confidentiality, you should also take steps to participate in Virtual Care in a private setting, use an encrypted email service if available, and you should not use an employer's or someone else's computer/device as they may be able to access your information.

If you want more information, please check the [website/confirmation email/etc.]. If it is determined you require a physical exam you may still need to be assessed in person. You should also understand that virtual care is not a substitute for attending the Emergency Department if urgent care is needed. If you continue, you consent to the use of electronic communication to provide you with care, are you ok to continue?"

More information to help support the consent process is available on the OMA virtual care page.

It is also a good idea to post information to support the consent process in your practice, on your website or as a patient hand-out. For standard language to use, please visit OntarioMD.

You should also record that verbal express consent was obtained when using a product that does not have explicit health care consent. A standard template to copy into your EMR is available at OntarioMD.

Your OntarioMD-certified electronic medical record (EMR) may also have virtual care capabilities you can leverage during the COVID-19 pandemic.

OntarioMD also recommends that physicians keep up-to-date with COVID-19 news as it relates to your practice by reading OMA President's Updates, OMA Member Alerts, and by visiting OMA.org.