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What is Telemedicine?

Home / What is Telemedicine?

555

Formally defined, telemedicine is the use of medical information exchanged from one site to another via electronic communications to improve a patient's clinical health status. Telemedicine includes a growing variety of applications and services using two-way video, email, smart phones, wireless tools and other forms of telecommunications technology.

Starting out over forty years ago with demonstrations of hospitals extending care to patients in remote areas, the use of telemedicine has spread rapidly and is now becoming integrated into the ongoing operations of hospitals, specialty departments, home health agencies, private physician offices as well as consumer's homes and workplaces.

Telemedicine is not a separate medical specialty. Products and services related to telemedicine are often part of a larger investment by health care institutions in either information technology or the delivery of clinical care. Even in the reimbursement fee structure, there is usually no distinction made between services provided on site and those provided through telemedicine and often no separate coding required for billing of remote services. ATA has historically considered telemedicine and telehealth to be interchangeable terms, encompassing a wide definition of remote healthcare. Patient consultations via video conferencing, transmission of still images, e-health including patient portals, remote monitoring of vital signs, continuing medical education, consumer-focused wireless applications and nursing call centers, among other applications, are all considered part of telemedicine and telehealth.

While the term telehealth is sometimes used to refer to a broader definition of remote healthcare that does not always involve clinical services, ATA uses the terms in the same way one would refer to medicine or health in the common vernacular. Telemedicine is closely allied with the term health information technology (HIT). However, HIT more commonly refers to electronic medical records and related information systems while telemedicine refers to the actual delivery of remote clinical services using technology.