Medicare\(^1\) has changed its policies to make it easier for older Americans to “see” their doctors without going in for an office visit. The idea is to allow more seniors to follow the advice of health experts and avoid being exposed to the coronavirus by staying home. To take advantage of the new policy, they will need access to a computer, laptop, smartphone, or tablet.

It’s part of an expansion of Medicare rules authorized by Congress and set in motion under emergency declarations from the Trump administration. The expanded telehealth\(^2\) coverage will be in effect during the coronavirus pandemic.

Most people on Medicare are at higher risk for COVID-19 because of their age and because many have underlying health conditions such as lung disease, diabetes or heart problems that increase their risk even more. The ability to continue routine care or get checked out for mild symptoms without having to go to the doctor’s office will help them practice recommended social distancing.
The change means Medicare will pay health care providers for more telehealth services. Previously, Medicare limited telehealth visits to rural areas, and patients had to go to allowed sites for the visits. Recently, Medicare also began allowing brief “check-ins” through phone, video chat, and online patient portals. Now Medicare patients everywhere in the US can use their device from home, or from any health care facility including doctors’ offices, hospitals, nursing homes, or rural health clinics. And services can now include routine office visits, mental health counseling, and some preventive health screenings. Deductibles and co-insurance will still apply.

For example, people on Medicare can now visit with a doctor about their diabetes management or refilling prescriptions using telehealth without having to go to a doctor’s office or hospital which could put themselves and others at risk for COVID-19. As a result, the doctor’s office is available to treat more people who do need to be seen in-person and it helps slow the spread of the virus.

The Trump administration is also asking state Medicaid agencies to offer telehealth services since they don’t require federal approval.

Hyperlinks


Reviewed by


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