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A Pandemic Legacy: Majority of Mental Health Appointments Stay Remote

By Linda Searing

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More than half of mental health appointments — 55 percent — are being conducted remotely, mainly via videoconferencing rather than in-person visits, according to a [brief research report in the journal Annals of Internal Medicine](#).

Telemedicine, also known as telehealth, enables patients to obtain care via technology, most often a cellphone, video chat, computer or tablet.

The study's findings stem from analysis of patient information from Jan. 1, 2019, through Aug. 31, 2023, from the Department of Veterans Affairs; it included data on more than 277 million outpatient visits made by 9 million veterans.

The research confirmed that the volume of telemedicine visits overall increased dramatically once the coronavirus pandemic began, becoming far more common than in-person visits.

For primary care and mental health care, for instance, the researchers found that in-person appointments dropped from 81 percent to 23 percent in the first few months of the pandemic. By spring 2023, however, phone-based care largely had returned to its pre-pandemic level, but video-based care had stayed close to its pandemic peak, representing a 2,300 percent increase from its pre-pandemic level.

“The majority (55%) of mental health care continues to be provided via telemedicine, likely due to the ease of adapting mental health services to virtual platforms,” the researchers wrote.

By comparison, they noted, primary care and medical specialists’ care often require in-person evaluations such as physical examinations, making telemedicine appointments less viable.