

Telehealth claims increased 3,000% in November, report finds

Telehealth claims increased 2,938% in November, compared to the same month in 2019, according to Fair Health's latest monthly [tracker](#), released Tuesday.

The report from Fair Health, a Midtown nonprofit promoting health care cost transparency, covers national and regional telehealth claims dating from January 2020.

National telehealth claims were only 0.2% of all claims in November 2019, but a year later they shot up nearly 3,000% to about 6% of claims.

The Northeast region, which includes Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Vermont, had the lowest claims rate pre-pandemic and the highest claims rate of all regions in November. In November 2019 telehealth claims were only 0.08% in the region, but they increased over 8,000%, to 7.2%, a year later.

By comparison, the South, Midwest and West regions had telehealth claims rates of 0.36%, 0.1% and 0.2%, respectively, in November 2019. A year later they grew to rates of 4.3%, 4.9% and 7.9%, respectively.

New York specifically saw growth of about 6,200% in claims, said Robin Gelburd, president of Fair Health.

The state has a high concentration of hospitals and physicians, spelling a lower need to reach for telemedicine services pre-pandemic, said Iris Berman, vice president of telehealth services at Northwell Health.

The area's higher density probably accounted for why virtual visits were adopted at a higher rate during the pandemic, Berman said.

"People were less likely to want to take public transit to see a doctor," she said.

Northwell Health and Mount Sinai observed similar trends as Covid-19 hit. Before the pandemic, Mount Sinai was doing about 25 telehealth visits per day—well under 1%—but that jumped to over 5,000 per day, said Dr. Bruce Darrow, chief medical information officer at the health system. Berman reported similar volumes of about 5,000 to 8,000 virtual visits per day, compared with a few hundred per year pre-pandemic.

Mental health care has remained the top category for telehealth claims nationally and regionally since October. The category was about 48% of claims in November, compared to about 24% in 2019. Acute respiratory care was the top claims category then.

In the Northeast, however, mental health was the top claims category even in November 2019, when it was about 40% of claims. The pandemic heightened that demand to nearly 54% of claims. In New York, mental health accounted for 55% of telehealth claims.

Longer mental health treatment sessions were being billed in November too, the report noted. Codes for 60 minutes of psychotherapy were the second-most billed that month nationally and in the Northeast, compared to the previous year, which was a 20-minute medical discussion session nationally and 45 minutes of psychotherapy in the Northeast.

Unique to New York was the rise in substance-use-disorder telehealth claims, which took the number four treatment category in November.

The pandemic easing telehealth restrictions has really helped substance-use-disorder patients, Berman said.

"In the old days, such patients would have to schedule an appointment to go to the clinic to receive treatment or end up in the emergency room with an overdose," she said.

Waivers lifting such restrictions and the convenience of telehealth has helped substance-use-disorder patients access care the moment they have a craving, she noted. She added that she hoped these waivers remain even after the pandemic or progress in this category might be undone.

Telehealth usage might slow down in the future, but it has incredible staying power, Gelburd said. Categories such as mental health care and substance-use disorders are well-suited to virtual visits and likely will be expanded going forward, she said.