



Telemedicine: Delivering Care Safely During COVID-19



WellMed serves thousands safely, conveniently with telemedicine

With the COVID-19 virus threatening people’s health around the world, many health care organizations have employed digital medicine to address the new normal of social distancing, quarantine and self-isolation. WellMed, a leading health care delivery organization serving more than 600,000 Medicare-eligible

patients, launched a number of innovative programs in the early days of the pandemic to keep patients as safe and as healthy as possible.

COVID-19 is a highly contagious virus, and older adults are highly susceptible. The virus can cause death in those who have underlying chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease or COPD.

Social distancing is critical for these types of patients; however, regular health care services are still highly necessary.¹

COVID-19 drove home the significance of yet another issue: isolation and loneliness. The extended separation of older adults from their caregivers increased the health care community’s interest in, and need for, telehealth. While virtual appointments were a “nice to have” capability prior to 2020, the ability to provide care from a distance became a necessity as the pandemic made it increasingly difficult to deliver in-person care and to monitor health status for older adults quarantined in their homes or care facilities.

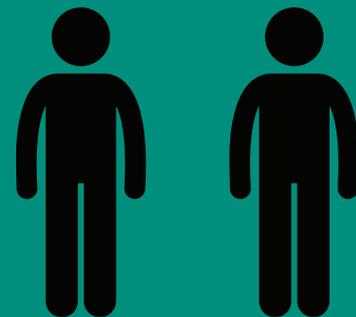
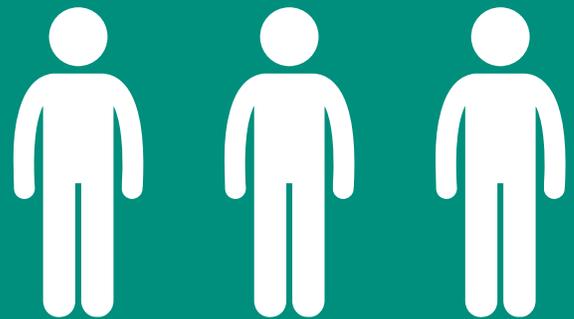
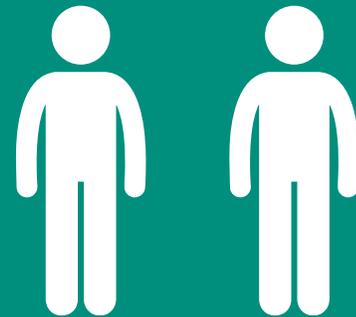
When COVID-19 hit the United States in early 2020, the hardest-hit population was older adults. According to the Centers for Disease Control, eight out of ten COVID-19 deaths reported in the United States have been adults 65 years old and older. Because of the contagious nature of the disease, WellMed needed to find a way to virtually treat as many patients as possible – not just for COVID, but for all of their health care needs.

During the height of COVID-19, WellMed acted quickly to form WellMed CARES, a telemedicine strategy to engage 500,000 senior citizen patients by any means necessary to ensure their care was not delayed or deferred.

An interdisciplinary team of **more than 10,000** clinicians, care advocates, support personnel and transportation professionals established and implemented a robust telemedicine strategy that employs multiple telemedicine platforms.

- To ensure we could reach all patients, including those without digital devices or internet access, WellMed deployed 1,025 network-connected tablets specifically designed for older adults. Patient transport teams were redeployed to deliver these tablets to patients' homes, vehicles, skilled nursing facilities or senior centers, and to later retrieve them.
- We established a patient concierge service staffed by our marketing team and call center personnel to enroll more than 100,000 patients to telemedicine platforms and quickly provided access to care via digital means.

COVID-19 AND OLDER ADULTS: BY THE NUMBERS



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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

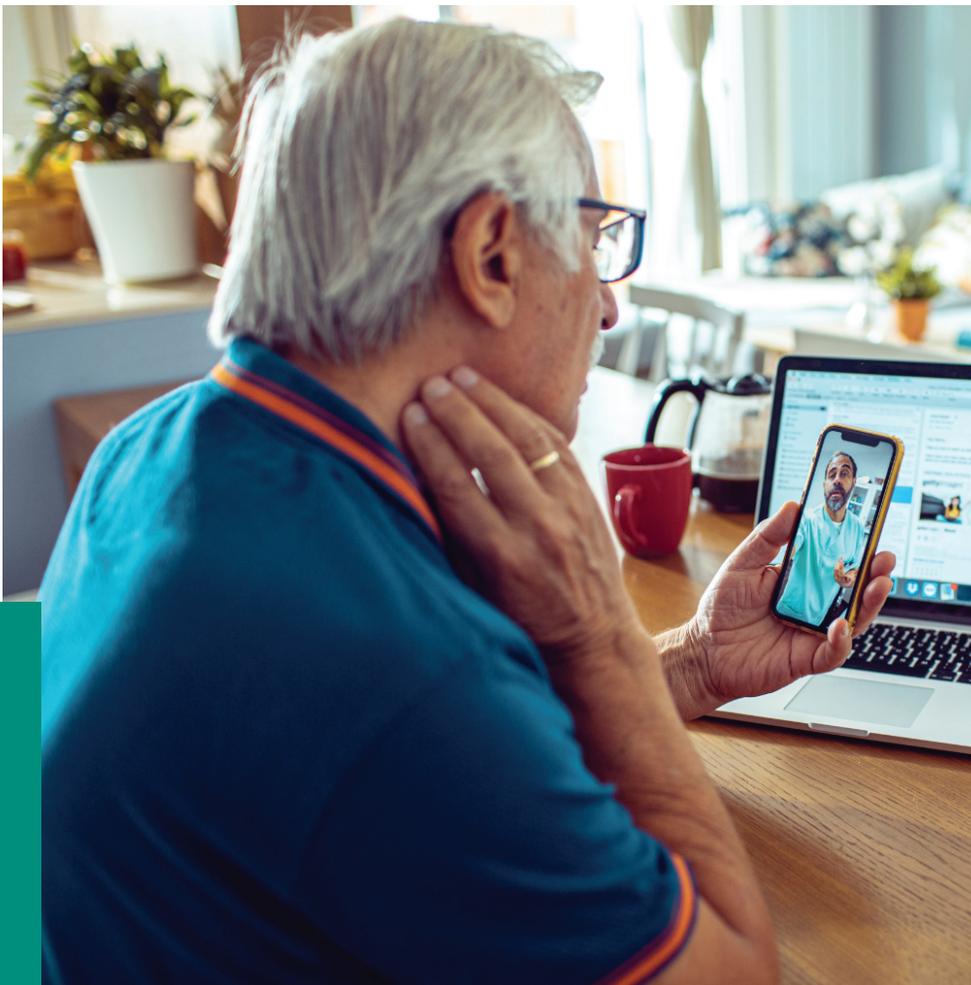
- We rapidly trained more than 5,000 staff members using “genius bars” to ensure they had the skills needed to effectively engage our patients.

- We established a team of advanced practice clinicians (physicians, nurse practitioners and physician assistants) to provide 24/7 on-demand telemedicine visits with the intent to reduce unnecessary urgent care and emergency room visits. The on-demand service is the Wellmed central virtual clinic that provides 24/7 care for patients. The patient simply calls in to a central queue to receive care. The average wait time is less than five minutes.

The telemedicine program offers a convenient and user-friendly platform that allows a patient to see their provider in their own home. WellMed is improving

access to health care for a population that might not otherwise have it. The program’s goals are to:

- Provide chronic, acute and transitional care services to a defined and targeted patient population.
- Improve patient outcomes and engagement.
- Improve provider satisfaction.
- Reduce the cost-of-care delivery by facilitating improved access to care.
- Reduce unnecessary ER visits, hospital admissions and urgent care visits.



"At WellMed, we feel a great sense of accomplishment that patients can connect with their providers with technology."

- Cindy Johnston, MD, MS, CPC, CMQ, chief of medical affairs for WellMed

MyHealthLightNow telemedicine

MyHealthLightNow was created as a concierge telemedicine platform. According to a 2019 senior consumer survey²:



73%

of seniors said faster health care service is the main reason they were willing to try telehealth.



58%

view telehealth as a way to save time.



54%

view it as a way to save money.



53%

view it as a way to gain better access to providers.



52%

of Americans ages 65+ are open to telemedicine.

MyHealthLightNow is a service that provides online access to a patient's medical team through a smartphone, tablet, or video and internet-enabled computer. Patients can call their clinic to register for an online doctor visit. The patient attends the online doctor visit by going to www.myhealthlightnow.com.

Support is available to help the patient schedule an appointment and set up the program on their smart phone, computer or tablet. After the visit, outcomes are shared with the primary care physician.

Tablets provided to patients

WellMed serves an older population of patients, some of whom are uncomfortable with technology or who don't have financial means to afford a smart phone, tablet or other personal device to participate in telemedicine. For these patients, WellMed developed a solution to remove this barrier to delivery of health care. With the use of network-connected tablets supplied by WellMed, patients can meet with a health care provider face-to-face online.

Here's how it works: When a patient arrives at a WellMed clinic, a sanitized tablet is delivered to them curbside so they can visit with their doctor online. WellMed also is able to send a sanitized tablet to the patient's home. The tablets are delivered via the WellMed-owned transportation service Comfort Care Transportation. After the tablet has been used, it is Comfort Care drivers pick it up and it is sanitized again for another online visit.

The tablet features:

- 24/7/365 built-in tech support.
- Video calls that can be recorded for compliance and audit purposes.
- Video with real-time texting and captioning.
- Auto-answer for those who are cognitively impaired.
- Older adult-friendly, touch screen, front-facing speakers and wireless charging.

Telemedicine results to date

WellMed currently has about 1,125 tablets in use across the enterprise, across all markets. The program began in May 2020. In its first month, 10,742 patients used the technology for visits. That number has risen to more than 53,000 per month, and 166,000 total for 2020.

Home deliveries of the tablet went from 1,235 in May 2020 to 4,656 in June 2020. Use of the tablets is now averaging 700 per month.

Initial WellMed patient survey responses show that patients are largely in favor of using the tablet for telemedicine. Among the survey responses:



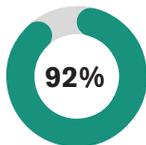
said the tablet was easy to use.



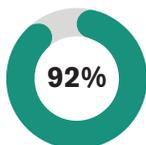
said the clinician spent enough time with them.



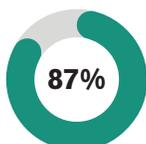
said the online appointment addressed their health care need.



said they had a good experience during the online visit.



said they would recommend online appointments to others.



said they would use the tablet again.

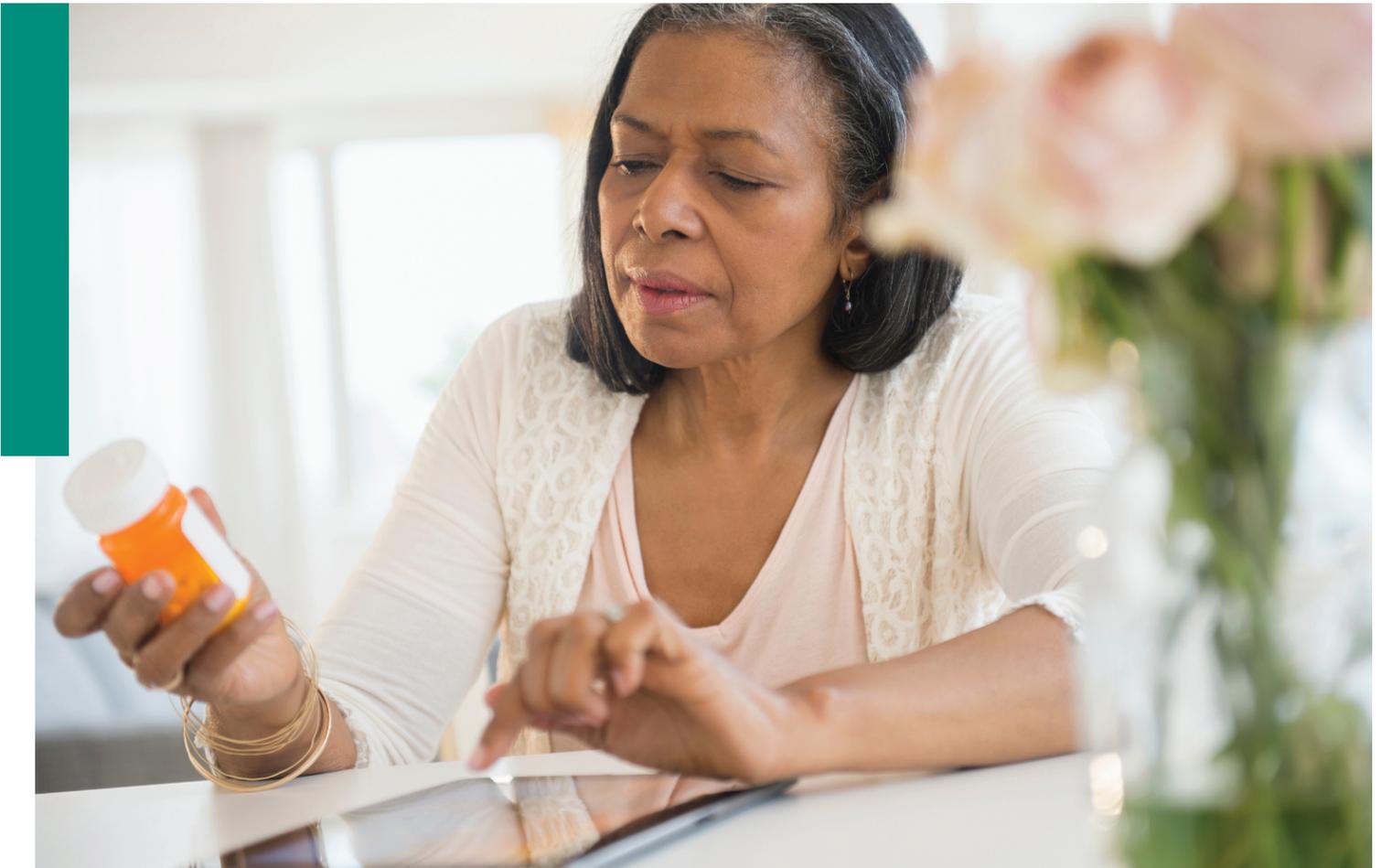


“Patients and caregivers who might otherwise be discouraged from seeking medical care can participate in a telemedicine visit and feel safe driving to their clinic and seeing their provider while remaining their car or see them from home,” Dr. Johnston said.

Our telemedicine appointments skyrocketed from nine care visits in February 2020 to more than 40,000 per month and more than 373,000 for 2020.

Fifteen percent of surveyed patients stated they avoided urgent care or ER admission due to telemedicine services with their PCP, and 46 percent avoided urgent care or ER admission due to on-demand telemedicine.

Our interdisciplinary telehealth model and enterprise-wide efforts truly changed the way medicine is and will be delivered in our organization and care delivery organizations across the nation.



Conclusion

As the COVID-19 virus struck the United States, WellMed acted rapidly to ensure the safety, health and continued care of its most vulnerable patients.

The pandemic required a rapid evolution of care at WellMed:

- Clinic visits decreased.
- Phone calls increased.
- Rapid deployment of telemedicine – from 46 providers trained to more than 1,200.
- Tablets operationalized and deployed.
- Standup of on demand telemedicine services.

“Without our initiative to bring technology to our patients for online visits, we would not have seen this volume of care being provided to those who need it.”

- Cindy Johnston, MD, MS, CPC, CMO,
chief of medical affairs for WellMed

¹ [khn.org/news/as-coronavirus-surges-programs-struggle-to-reach-vulnerable-seniors-living-at-home/](https://www.khn.org/news/as-coronavirus-surges-programs-struggle-to-reach-vulnerable-seniors-living-at-home/)

² American Well Harris Poll