

A New Kind of Doctor Visit

Telemedicine can help you save time and money by connecting you to a physician in minutes.

BY BARBARA BRODY



ONE RECENT MORNING LISAROSE WRIGHT, 53, WOKE UP WITH THE telltale signs of a urinary tract infection. She'd had UTIs before, so she knew she'd be miserable until she started antibiotics, but she didn't have time to visit her doctor. "I had a huge work project due, and there was no way I could miss the deadline," she recalls. She decided to try LiveHealth Online, a telemedicine app. Minutes later, she was video chatting with a board-certified physician. The doctor called in a prescription, and Wright picked up the pills on her way to work and got on with her busy day.



How Telemedicine Works

A number of services—including LiveHealth Online, MDLive, Teladoc, and Doctor On Demand—are now virtually connecting patients like Wright with providers.

Depending on the company, you'll call a main number or log on to an app or website and get routed to a licensed physician for a phone or video chat. You'll talk about your symptoms, and if you're using video you may be asked to hold your camera near your scratchy throat or the weird rash on your arm.

Your visit might be covered by your insurance plan (though you still may be responsible for a co-pay). If you're not covered, the price is usually moderate: LiveHealth Online, for instance, charges a \$49 fee, which is less than you'd spend on an ER visit. Plus, you won't have to pay for gas or a babysitter to watch your kids, and if you don't have sick-day benefits, it may be cheaper than missing work.



When Should You Use It?

➤ **You're in a remote place.** "Most of the time it's better to see a doctor in person, but if there aren't any urgent care centers for 50 miles, it's not a bad idea," says Shreyas Ravishankar, M.D., a pulmonary and critical care specialist on Long Island.

➤ **You don't know what to do next.** Is that middle-of-the-night pain appendicitis that should send you to the ER, or is it safe to lie low until you can visit your doctor in the morning? Online consults are useful for unclear situations.

➤ **You're in a time crunch.** Maybe you can't miss work, or perhaps your regular doctor isn't able to fit you in right away. A telemedicine service may get you the help you need faster, says Matthew Mintz, M.D., a Maryland-based internist.

➤ **You have a basic health issue.** If you need a prescription for a problem you've had in the past or have a run-of-the-mill ailment (like a nagging cough), a virtual visit makes a lot of sense.

ON-DEMAND DRAWBACKS

The convenience factor can't be beat, but there are downsides to telemedicine too:

THE CARE IS REMOTE

That means the doctor can't listen to your heart or look in your ear, and she certainly can't stitch up a wound or wrap a sprained finger.

YOU'RE A STRANGER

Yes, you can bring a doctor who's new to you up to speed, but it's not quite like seeing one who knows your health history well (though you can sometimes consult the same telemedicine doctor more than once).

YOU MAY STILL HAVE TO VISIT AN IN-THE-FLESH PROVIDER

If the virtual doctor suspects anything that requires immediate treatment, like a heart attack, or a chronic health ailment such as diabetes, you may be redirected to the ER or your regular doctor anyway.