

Teledentistry:

What to Know and How It Works



Dental care in the United States is changing. New and emerging technologies are beginning to shift providers away from the surgical management of oral disease to a greater focus on prevention and health promotion.

Teledentistry promotes equitable access to oral health care and represents an expansion of existing care, not a new form of care. Whether provided within a dental office, in a community setting, or from a patient's home, the suite of virtual tools allows for electronic communication and the delivery of health care services when patients are not or cannot be seen in a traditional office setting with a dentist present.

Telehealth

Telehealth refers to a [variety of technologies and tactics](#) used to virtually deliver health and education services. While not a specific service, telehealth is primarily a communications tool to enhance care and education delivery.

Different Means of Teledentistry



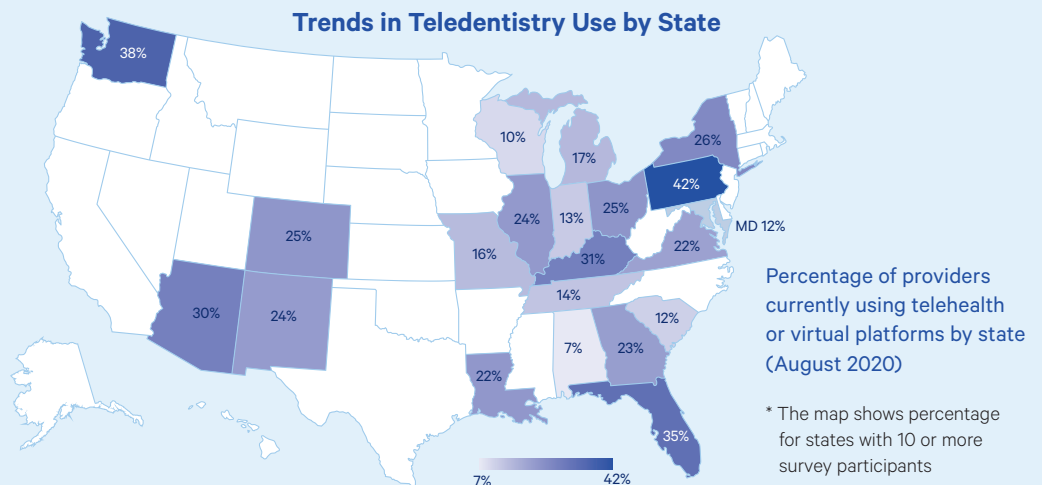
Live video (synchronous). This is two-way, "real-time" interaction between a health provider and someone else (a patient, their caregiver, or another provider) using telecommunications technology.



Store-and-forward (asynchronous). Patient care can be facilitated by transmitting photographs, video, X-rays or other recorded health information via a secure electronic system to a health provider who uses the information to evaluate a patient's condition and/or update a patient's treatment plan without live interaction.

The Use of Teledentistry is Growing

Throughout the country, the use of telehealth has expanded exponentially since the pandemic began. A Care Quest Institute for Oral Health [survey](#) completed in August 2020 found that dental providers have embraced teledentistry as a sustained means to provide safe, efficient, and accessible dental care in a pandemic environment and beyond.





A CareQuest Institute for Oral Health teledentistry survey completed in August 2020 **nearly a quarter (23%) of dental providers were seeing patients via telehealth platforms.**

In addition, **11% of providers** who were not utilizing telehealth for patient care **planned to use it in the near future.**

Of those providers making use of telehealth platforms, **public health dental providers (PDHPs)**

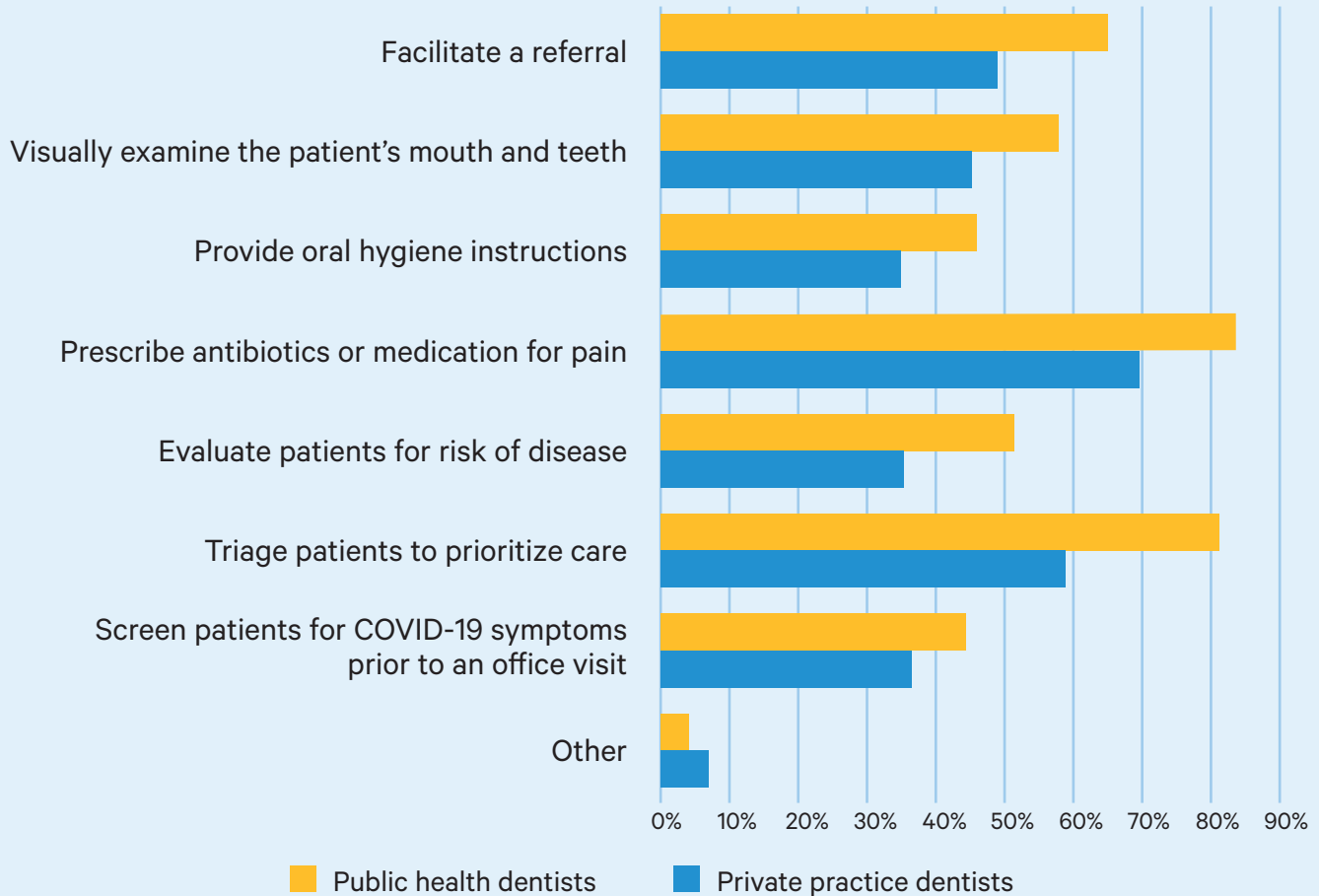
2X more likely

(44%) to use telehealth than all other practice types (21%).



More than **1 in 3 PHDPs (36%)** expected the number of telehealth encounters to increase over the next year, compared to **28%** of other types of providers.

Services provided via telehealth or virtual platform



Telehealth modalities

The majority of providers use telehealth modalities that primarily allow for synchronous communication:



60% telephone calls

42% free virtual meeting software

29% paid telehealth software

Telehealth dental services provided



72% prescribe antibiotics or medication for pain

63% triage patients to prioritize care

52% facilitate a referral

48% visual exam

38% COVID-19 screening prior to visit

38% evaluate for risk of disease

37% oral hygiene instructions



What Providers Are Saying

The most important benefit to our patients [of teledentistry] is the ability to triage and access a patient's current dental concerns without having the patient leave their homes... Teledentistry also keeps us engaged with our patients who are at high risk of dental disease and decay that at most times is affecting their overall health... These patients know we are here for them, and they get to see and talk directly with their dentist or hygienist. This will only help establish and reinforce patients' trust in their providers. It will also hopefully lower no-shows for future appointments and help to improve their overall dental and medical health moving forward.

— **Sandra Garbely-Kerkovich, DMD**

Vice President and Chief Dental Officer at Choptank Community Health System, an early adopter of teledentistry.

Interview conducted by Maryland Dental Action Coalition, April 2020

Teledentistry in Practice

Teledentistry can take many different forms and be utilized by a diverse dental workforce. Community-based programs, health centers, health systems, private practices, and others are making use of teledentistry to provide care to patients in various settings to reduce barriers to care.



In **Oregon**, a rural teledentistry program enables dental hygienists to assess schoolchildren's mouths visually, chart likely areas of tooth decay, take pictures and X-rays of a child's mouth, and use laptops to transmit this information to a dentist in another location who reviews these materials and develops a treatment plan for each participating child.



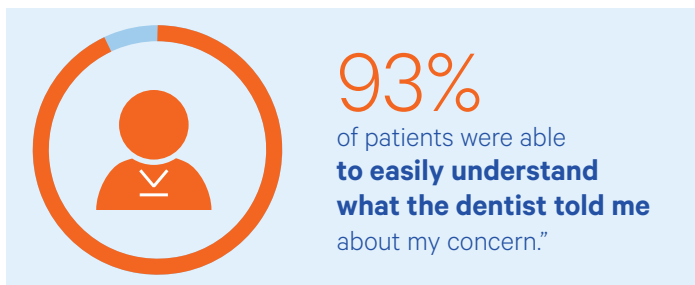
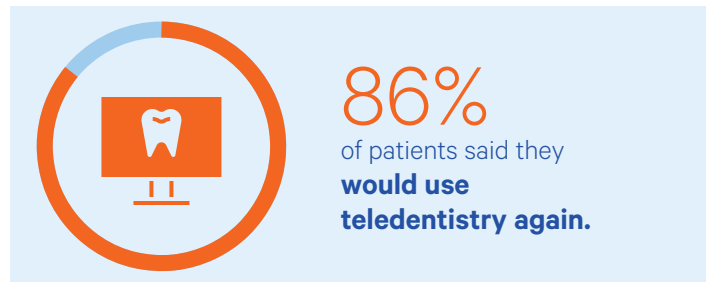
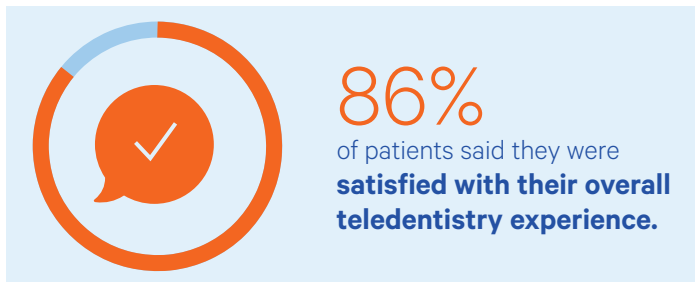
In **California's** Virtual Dental Home (VDH) model, specially trained dental hygienists and assistants collect dental records and provide preventive care for patients in schools, Head Start programs, and nursing homes. Information is then sent through a secure telehealth system to a dentist at a clinic or dental office who determines a diagnosis and develops a dental treatment plan. In addition to preventive procedures, the hygienist or assistant — if directed by a dentist to do so — may provide a small protective filling called an "interim therapeutic restoration," which stabilizes the tooth until the dentist can decide if additional treatment is needed. Patients who require more complex treatment are referred to a dentist and assisted in securing a dental appointment.



In **Missouri**, private and public health dentists are working with dental hygienists under general supervision to provide extended hours and satellite office coverage using teledentistry when the dentist is out of the office. In this example, a dental hygienist uses asynchronous teledentistry to capture all needed diagnostic data in order to establish new patients for examinations and to maintain the health of existing patients in need of a periodic examination and preventive care. This dental care delivery model creates equity in oral health by extending the availability of dental care outside of the constraints of the dentist's availability. This is particularly useful for patients with busy work or school schedules who are not able to access preventive care during typical business hours.

Patients Embrace Teledentistry

Results from a recent [CareQuest Institute for Oral Health survey](#) indicate that most patients want teledentistry and may even prefer it.



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