

Research Report

PROVIDER TELEDENTISTRY USE GAINS TRACTION DURING COVID-19

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With most providers open for comprehensive dental services, telehealth has become a sustained means to provide safe, efficient and accessible dental care in a pandemic environment. A new survey shows growth potential for telehealth as well as barriers to overcome in dentistry to provide quality services while reducing the cost of care.

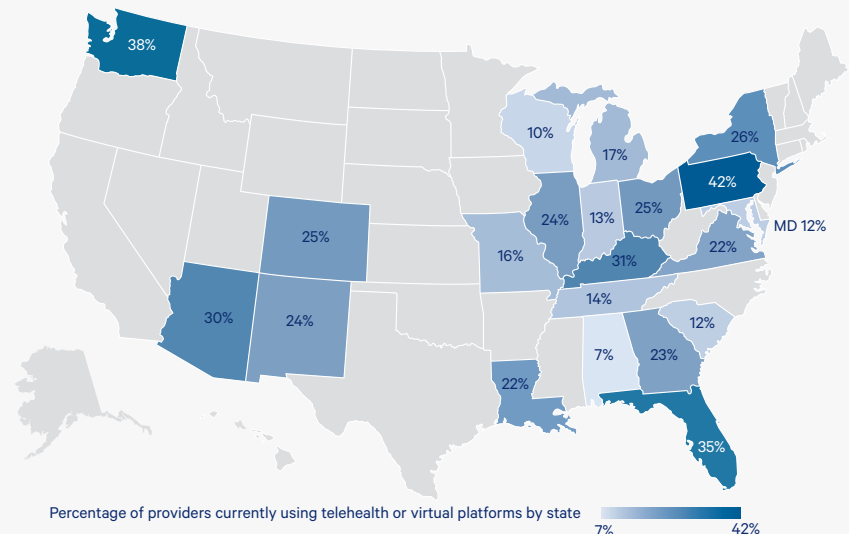
USE OF TELEHEALTH

Results from a recent survey conducted by the DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement (DQP) show that nearly a quarter (23%) of dental providers are continuing to see patients via telehealth platforms. In addition, 11% of providers who are not utilizing telehealth for patient care plan to use it in the near future.

The DQP survey was completed by 2,767 dental providers in more than 20 states in August 2020. When DQP conducted a similar [study](#) in June, many dental offices were closed or greatly restricted in the care that could be rendered. The June study revealed that 27% of providers were seeing patients via telehealth and 13% planned to do so in the near future. In June, dental offices were limited to mostly providing urgent and nonelective services. By August, these practices were operating in a less restrictive environment and provided more elective services. This stable use of telehealth from June to August as offices were reopening shows telehealth has “staying power” in dentistry.

Providers completing the August survey reported an average of 9% of their patient visits were performed via telehealth the prior week. There is a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$) in telehealth use by practice setting. Public health providers are more likely (44%) to use telehealth than all other practice types (21%). Additionally, there are differences in percentage of providers using telehealth based on location. In states such as Pennsylvania, Washington, Florida, Kentucky, and Arizona, at least 30% of providers are using telehealth to provide dental care (figure below). These differences may be due in part to payment and coverage policy variations among the states.

Dental practices that are seeing patients via telehealth care or virtual platforms by state

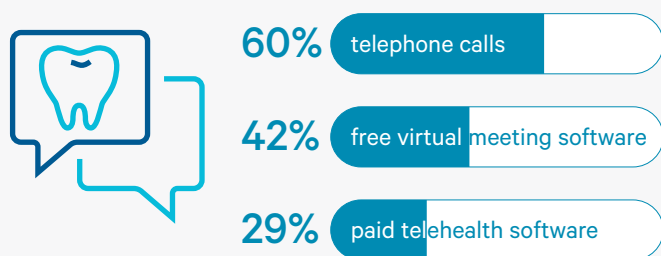


* The map shows percentage for states with 10 or more survey participants

The majority of providers use telehealth modalities that primarily allow for synchronous (“live”) communication:

- 60% of providers are using telephone calls
- 42% of providers are using a free virtual meeting software (e.g. Facetime, Zoom, Google Meets, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.)
- 29% of providers are using a paid telehealth software (e.g. Denteractive, Doxy.me, Luma Health, MouthWatch TeleDent, Teledentists, Virtual Dental Care)

Telehealth modalities



The need for alternative ways to receive dental care has been amplified by the need to comply with social distancing guidelines. Telehealth can be used to provide patients with a wide variety of dental services, but the August survey revealed that some services are being provided more than others:

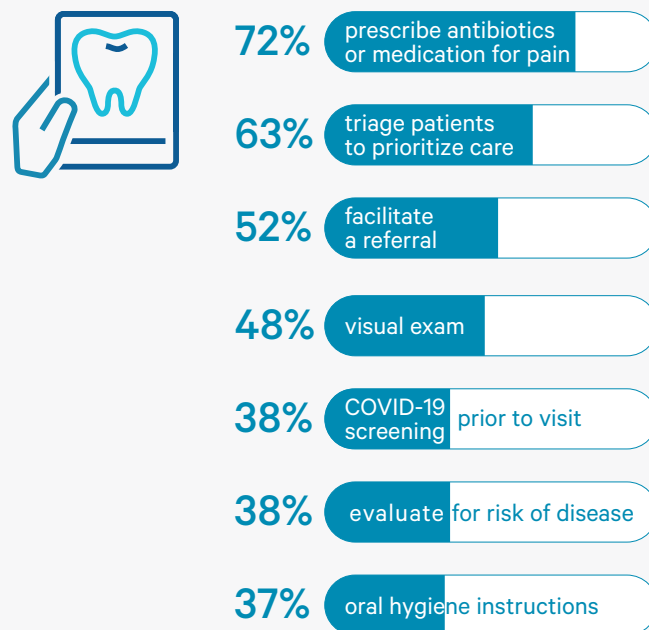
- 72% prescribe antibiotics or medication for pain
- 63% triage patients to prioritize care
- 52% facilitate a referral
- 48% visually examine the patients’ mouth/teeth
- 38% screen patients for COVID-19 symptoms prior to an office visit
- 38% evaluate patients for risk of disease
- 37% provided oral hygiene instructions

Providers were less likely to use telehealth to deliver preventive services than they were to employ this technology for diagnostic and prescription services. This finding dovetails with a [report](#) from the Centers

for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). The report revealed that delivery of any type of health service through telehealth increased by over 2,500% from February to April during the pandemic. However, rates for preventive services, including oral health, performed in person or via telehealth among children enrolled in Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) sharply decreased during the same time period. These services are vital to the prevention of disease and promoting positive long-term health outcomes for children covered through these programs.

In addition, the majority of providers practicing with telehealth used telephone calls; however, this modality (audio-only) is not reimbursed as commonly as other modalities. It also cannot be used to prescribe (controlled) pain medication, which was the most highly provided service (along with antibiotic prescriptions). The Drug Enforcement Administration mandates that audio-visual means must be used to provide a (controlled) pain medication prescription.¹

Telehealth dental services



OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

The ongoing uncertainties around COVID-19 has led to the expansion of telehealth usage. About 75% of providers who use telehealth services expect their telehealth encounter volume to stay the same



75% of dental providers who use telehealth services **expect their telehealth encounter volume to stay the same or increase** during the next 12 months

or increase during the next 12 months. Providers have mixed attitudes about when the pandemic will be brought under control in their state, with 25% expecting it to be brought under control within 60 days and another 25% expecting it to take 2 years or more, were unsure, never expect it be brought under control, or expected control

only when a vaccine is available. Once the pandemic has been brought under control, 62% of providers believe business will return to normal in less than one year. This extended period of recovery from COVID-19 necessitates the sustained use of telehealth to provide safe, non-contact care to patients.

Telehealth will be a long-term opportunity in dentistry and providers should embrace it to deliver a variety of services, including prevention. As a recent DQP [white paper](#) explains, growth in the use of teledentistry brings many benefits to patients and providers, including increased patient access to dental care, access to new patient populations, more efficient and safe triage of patient needs, potential for increased revenue, a more efficient referral process, and opportunities to improve oral health while reducing costs. Satisfaction with telehealth is also vital to

building momentum for this innovative model of care. Recent surveys show strong satisfaction among patients and providers:

- Of the providers using telehealth, most (62%) are somewhat or very satisfied with the technology they use to conduct telehealth encounters.
- In a [study](#) by Advantage Dental by DentaQuest and the DentaQuest Partnership, researchers found that most (86%) of patients were satisfied with their overall teledentistry experience, and 93% reported being able “to easily understand what the dentist told me about my concern.”

In March, CMS noted that “no federal approval is needed for state Medicaid programs to reimburse providers for teledentistry services.” According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, many states have expanded Medicaid coverage for teledental services.³ This enabled providers predominately serving patients enrolled in Medicaid to use telehealth as a part of their pandemic business model.

Expanding the use of telehealth will require overcoming barriers in dentistry. Obstacles include how state dental practice acts classify telehealth services, reimbursement differences by insurer, lack of clarity surrounding data security, and inequities in the availability of technology to all patient populations. In addition, 42% of providers in the survey reported using a free, non-HIPAA compliant communication platform, which is permitted by the Office for Civil Rights for the duration of the pandemic.² However, reinstatement of HIPAA requirements after the pandemic could deter the use of teledentistry.

TELEHEALTH AND THE FUTURE OF DENTAL CARE FINANCING

Although dental offices had largely reopened by the time of the August survey, the [results](#) indicate that offices still face logistical and financial challenges during the pandemic.

Telehealth has been a helpful tool for dental providers to adapt to their uncertain environments:

- Providers who reported no change or more patient volumes were significantly less likely to use telehealth (52% and 53%, respectively) as compared to those reporting lesser volumes.
- Providers who expected long-term changes in dentistry because of COVID-19, (such as with infection control, patient volume, use of minimally invasive care, and operational procedures) were more than 3 times as likely to say they use telehealth currently or will do so in the future compared to those who do not expect any long-term changes.
- Providers with more than half of patients enrolled in Medicaid were 39% more likely to use telehealth.

The results also revealed that dental providers who use telehealth are 34% more familiar with alternative payment models (APMs) and are 45% more likely to have an increased interest in learning about APMs than those who don't use telehealth. With the expected rise of value-based care and APMs in dentistry⁴, telehealth can be used as a tool to extend care in ways that enhance the financial sustainability of dental practices. Telehealth can reduce the cost of care through efficient and widespread delivery of care and oral health education, while also enhancing the capacity of practices to provide care for additional patients or existing patients with more complex needs. APMs should be designed in a way that incentivizes providers to use telehealth to provide patient-centered, quality dental care.

Telehealth can reduce the cost of care through efficient and widespread delivery of care and oral health education, while also enhancing the capacity of practices to provide care for additional patients or existing patients with more complex needs.



Dental providers who...

reported no change or more patient volumes were about

50% LESS LIKELY

to use telehealth as compared to those reporting lesser volumes

expected long-term changes in dentistry because of COVID-19 were more than

3X AS LIKELY

to use telehealth currently or will do so in the future compared to those who don't expect long-term change

use telehealth services are

34% MORE FAMILIAR

45% MORE INTERESTED

in learning about APMs than those who don't use telehealth

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The majority of dental providers surveyed are using telephone call and free virtual meeting software to deliver dental care through telehealth. In addition, among these providers, telehealth is being utilized

As growth in telehealth utilization is projected, permanent policy changes are vital to allow for widespread reimbursement of telehealth-enabled preventive services, minimally invasive care and care coordination, as well as including allied dental professionals as providers of these services.

mostly to screen, triage, and prescribe medication, all of which are generally used to treat urgent dental needs. Conversely, preventive services were the least likely to be offered to patients via telehealth. This represents an opportunity for more providers to use telehealth for patient education and other person-centered, preventive services, rather than just for triaging urgent services.

While this survey reveals providers' positive attitudes about the continued use and growth of telehealth

to provide dental services, COVID-19 has driven expansion of insurance coverage and enabling regulatory policies. This has allowed swift adoption of telehealth for emergent services (e.g., prescription writing) more than for preventive services. As growth in telehealth utilization is projected, permanent policy changes are vital to allow for widespread reimbursement of telehealth-enabled preventive services, minimally invasive care and care coordination, as well as including allied dental professionals as providers of these services.

The financial health of a dental practice and their use of telehealth are related. Providers who experienced financial disruption and expect long-term changes to dental practice from COVID-19 were more likely to use telehealth. Telehealth has the potential to provide additional revenue while enhancing dental care access for current and new patients. In addition, telehealth has the potential to offer cost-savings by diverting patients from seeking more expensive care, such as from an emergency department.⁵ Achieving cost savings while providing quality care and maintaining patient satisfaction is a hallmark of value-based oral health care. As there is a shift toward alternative-based payment models in dentistry, the use of telehealth as a value-based care tool will likely increase.

METHODOLOGY

The DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement conducted this electronic survey from August 13 to September 1, 2020, by sending an emailed invitation and link to a list of 21,617 DentaQuest-enrolled dental providers in more than 20 states. Up to three reminders were sent to prompt completion. Respondents were only asked to complete the entire survey if they indicated having a high degree of familiarity with their dental office's patient volume, staffing, dental insurance carriers, treatment protocols, and the office's pre- and post-COVID finances. A total of 2,767 dental providers partially or fully completed the survey, for a response rate of 13%, and 2,299 passed the screening questions.

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The DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement is a nonprofit organization working to transform the broken health care system and enable better health through oral health. Through strategic grantmaking, research and care improvement initiatives, we drive meaningful change at the local, state and national levels. The DentaQuest Partnership is affiliated with DentaQuest, a leading U.S. oral health enterprise with a mission to improve the oral health of all.

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