



Telehealth and the Impact on Senior Healthcare

Telehealth as a broad term means anything related to remote healthcare support and accessing health information. When connecting patients and providers, telehealth can improve outcomes and provide care at a more efficient cost. According to a study by the Center for Technology and Aging at the University of California, for every \$1 invested in remote health monitoring, up to \$1.30 was saved in the first year alone.

The Affordable Care Act has worked to encourage a new approach for care providers to not only treat patients effectively but also to prevent condition relapses and readmissions, particularly among the senior population. The United States, with one of the fastest-growing senior populations, offers one of the biggest opportunities for the telehealth market and the development of digital health tools for seniors.

Benefits of Telehealth in the Senior Market:

With an increasing number of seniors going online, institutions have begun to see how telehealth technologies can provide a more convenient and beneficial option for senior health services. Here are some of the many benefits of telehealth technologies for seniors:

- Provides a link between home care and physician care
- Addresses skyrocketing senior healthcare costs
- Enables seniors to age safely at home
- Reduces reliance and costs associated with assisted living or in-home care
- Delivers accessible health care to patients in rural areas
- Gives patients and caregivers more involvement in managing health
- Cost-savings to physician office for routine follow-up appointments
- Reduces hospital readmissions, as well as related penalties for providers
- Alerts nursing staff or physician office if patients experience a fall or other episode
- Prevents complications from chronic conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease
- Provides patient independence and confidence while giving caregivers peace of mind
- Enhances overall population health

Applications of Telehealth in the Senior Market:

According to a report from medical market research publisher *Kalorama Information*, the worldwide telemedicine patient-monitoring market grew from \$4.2 billion in 2007 to more than \$10 billion in 2012. In addition, information and analytics firm IHS says that telehealth revenue in the U.S. will grow from \$240 million in 2013 to \$1.9 billion by 2018. While many applications for telehealth exist, some of the ways institutions are using telemedicine for caring for seniors today include:

- **Remote Vital Sign Monitoring:** Telecommunications equipment to monitor patient's vital signs and conduct a daily health check. The patient's physician can assign each patient a monitoring device, which can be a wearable device or a portable device, complete with specific care directives, and the process takes only minutes. In-home telemonitoring typically tests for health information such as blood glucose, weight, blood pressure and pulse, but can also analyze more serious conditions such as pulmonary or cardiac monitoring. The monitoring physician, nurse or institution automatically receives the data via a secure phone line within seconds, and can analyze, report any problems and take necessary action steps. Monitoring can also directly feed into the patient's electronic medical record (EHR). Other ways that providers are using remote vital sign monitoring to monitor patient information are through community health screening programs at expos or senior-focused events, nonprofit organizations, private programs at senior housing sites, and even mobile programs.
- **Remote consultations / Social checkups:** Telehealth services can be used for health care providers to periodically or regularly check in on seniors to see how they are doing in areas such as nutrition, fitness, housing, mental health, accessibility, screenings and vaccinations, transportation and general care. Physicians may use videoconferencing to conduct follow-up appointments to keep tabs on a patient's condition or, in combination with vital sign monitoring equipment, participate in a virtual office visit. As a different type of remote consultation, long-term care facilities will often bring in a physician for diagnostic triaging of patients when certain types of episodes occur, in order to avoid unnecessary hospitalization or transportation for such tests. According to the American Telemedicine Association, about 800,000 online medical consultations will be done in 2015, with some portion of these to the senior population.
- **Administrative support:** Patients and their caregivers can also use telehealth to manage care plans, promote medication adherence, and remain on top of patients' changing health. By assessing information via a patient portal, patients and caregivers can review incident history and records, diagnoses, lab or test results as well as insurance payments and plan options. With much of this information available online, patients and caregivers no longer have to rely on physician offices or hospital staff to relay this information via mail, phone or in-person requests. In addition, senior care management agencies are beginning to collaborate via web-based platforms to coordinate care monitoring and relay patient information between providers, patients and caregivers.

Obstacles and Opportunities for Growth:

Some of the limiting factors, as well as opportunities for the expansion of telehealth, include:

- **Currently little reimbursement** – While some insurance companies buy into the cost-savings, not all health insurance providers have embraced telemedicine services. While most insurers cover at least some telehealth services (many states require some form of telehealth coverage from private insurers and 46 states offer some type of Medicaid reimbursement), coverage and reimbursement for specific services varies from state to state. These numbers will continue to grow as telehealth becomes more mainstream.
- **Lack of support for rural communities:** While Medicare currently reimburses for some telehealth services, it requires that patients live in a "shortage area" far from a major health center and still must originate support from a clinical site to qualify. As CMS

begins to recognize the cost benefits of offering telemedicine and telehealth support, it will likely increase reimbursement for Medicare and Medicaid recipients.

- **Low physician adoption:** Physicians may be hesitant to implement telemedicine technology such as videoconferencing as an option due to the cost to implement, the lack of reimbursement, and the fear of low patient participation, particularly among the senior population. Again, this will change as telehealth becomes reimbursable as well as more widely adopted, as it becomes more integrated into a physician's workflow, and as technology makes it easier for patients and physicians to use telehealth technology via methods such as smartphones and tablets.
- **Privacy and security:** One hurdle consists of complying with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) as well as state laws governing technology use and information sharing. However, telehealth providers as well as technology integrators such as CoreTech Revolution are working to ensure that all telehealth technology implemented follows the strict guidelines set in place by local, state and national laws to protect and share data.

As the aging population continues to grow, telemedicine and telehealth technology can help seniors live more independent lives while keeping costs down and improving efficiencies, without sacrificing the level of care. As telehealth becomes more accepted and widely used for routine monitoring, self-care, and decision-support, these technologies will not only become more acceptable among the senior population, but they will become more integrated with global care.