Telemedicine Essentials for Podiatric Physicians
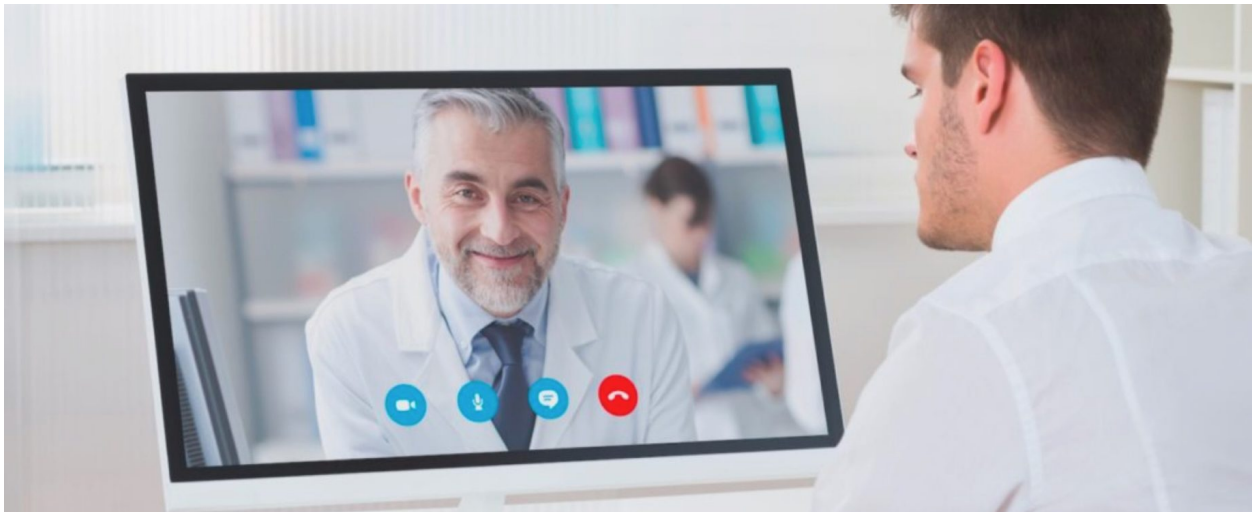
The Rapidly Changing Landscape

By now you're likely aware of the policy changes that now permit podiatric physicians to care for patients remotely. These changes were announced by the [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) under the 1135 waiver authority and Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act](#).

You're probably asking yourself…"Is this something that would benefit my patients and my practice?" There are a lot of unknowns and uncertainty when introducing any new service.

I've put together this resource to help you educate yourself about the basics and understand your options. By following each step of the guide, you'll be on your way to making the right decision for you and your practice.

Here are some telemedicine topics that we'll cover:

- Coding requirements & resources to stay up to date

- Patient insurance companies - reimbursements and billing code policies

- How to select the right telemedicine technology

- Creating a telemedicine workflow and implementing it into your practice

- Promoting you telemedicine services in you local area and state

> *Explore the opportunity & determine if it's right for you and your practice.*

Coding/Insurance

> *Be sure to use the updated APMA coding & insurance resources.*

This guide is focuses primarily on the technology, workflow and promotion of your telemedicine services.

For the most up to date and accurate information about coding and insurance coverage, the APMA has created a great a couple of great resources. Instead of summarizing them in this guide, I suggest you visit and read their resources:

[COVID-19 Update: Podiatrists Can Provide E/M Services Remotely](#)

[Private Payer Telemedicine / Telemedicine Coverage Policies](#)

Dr. Jeffrey Lehrman, who's been spearheading a lot of the APMA coding initiatives, is very active on Twitter and is usually pretty quick to respond to people on that platform. You can follow him: [@DrLehrman](#)

There have also been some in-depth and helpful conversations and recommendations around these topics over at [Codingline](#). It's worth the $100 annual subscription to gain access and have your questions answered by experts.

It's also important to know where your state laws, [podiatric](#) and [medical boards](#) stand. Some more restrictive states may waive certain regulations due to our national state of emergency, but perform some due diligence before starting to provide telemedicine services.

The security of patient data and health information is vital, so be sure to continue following HIPAA regulations. Only a few telemedicine policies have been loosened during the state of emergency. It's our duty to protect the information of patients.

After reading the APMA's resource or Codingline, do you have a better understanding of the telemedicine services you can provide and bill for?

When it comes to insurance reimbursement, I recommend that you find the 5 most commonly used plans by patient's in your practice. Read through their telemedicine policies in order to gain a clear understanding of what they do and don't cover. There's no sense in offering something you won't get paid for providing.

Coding requirement and insurance reimbursement are two of the biggest unknowns to address when exploring this opportunity. Next, we'll get into the benefits of providing this new service.

What are the Benefits of Telemedicine?

We are living in unprecedented times. The current recommendations and some state laws, have restricted podiatric physicians to urgent or emergency office visits and surgeries.

Those of us who provide in-office and surgical procedures are struggling figure out a path forward.

Telemedicine can fill holes in your current clinic schedule or become a vehicle to help fuel the longterm growth of your practice.

Adding telemedicine to your practice has some signifiant benefits:

Treat anyone in the state(s) where you hold a valid license.

1. ## Expands access to care and reaches more patients

   - Increase your pool of potential patients and serve patients in rural areas and outside your local area.

   - Telemedicine could create the opportunity for you to treat anyone who lives in the state(s) where you hold a valid license.

2. Opportunity for extra revenue

   - Offer additional and/or non-standard appointment hours. Even when your physical office is shut down for any reason, you still have ability to generate revenue.

3. Convenient & location independent

   - Deliver foot and ankle care with evaluation and management from your home, office or other locations.

4. Reduce no-shows/cancellations

   - Patients have no travel time with a telemedicine visit, so they are less likely to be late or no show due to traffic or inability to get transportation.

5. Lower practice overhead

   - Telemedicine software costs very little compared to the human resources and material expenses that come along with on-site visits.

6. Improves patient satisfaction

   - In a recent survey by J.D. Power, patient satisfaction with telemedicine services scores 851 (on a 1,000-point scale) and among the highest of all healthcare, insurance and financial services industry studies conducted by them.

Telemedicine Technology Options

During this state of emergency, all communications technologies are allowed when conducting the telemedicine visits, including FaceTime, WhatsApp and others. When the state of emergency ends, a secure, HIPAA-compliant telemedicine solution will be required.

If you are seriously considering a trial or permanent virtual visit solution, I strongly suggest you use a technology that is currently HIPAA-compliant or can be easily converted to a paid HIPAA-compliant version in the future.

Needing to switch from FaceTime to a HIPAA-compliant technology in the future is waste of both time and money. Better to get started off on the right foot to begin with.

I've picked out a few of the best and most commonly used communications apps/services and a look into their pros and cons:

HIPAA Compliant

Telemedicine software built into or integrates directly with your EHR

There are so many different kinds of EHR systems available, I can't go into specifics about all the options available. But if your software is advanced enough you likely have one or couple of choices. This feature might also be included in your current service plan at no additional cost.

For example, NextGen has an integration telemedicine provider OTTO.

Pros:

- Ties into your existing practice software which could help reduce time spent scheduling, billing and receiving reimbursement.
- More likely to be HIPAA-compliant
- Most will have video, audio and text
- A potential long-term solution
- May work from browsers

Cons:

- Maybe difficult to get setup during the national emergency
- More expensive upfront costs
- Testing and getting comfortable with a new software could impact productivity

Doxy.me (Mobile, Tablet, Desktop Browsers)
Pros:

- Free & paid version both HIPAA compliant
- Video & audio
- Works well both on WiFi and mobile internet connection
- Browser only, no apps needed
- Cross-platform so different types of devices can work with each other, ex. *A doctor with an iPhone can perform care with a patient on an Android phone.*

Cons:

- Not integrated into your practice management/EMR software (simple integration possible with simple link/button)

Zoom (Web, Apple devices, Android devices, Windows PCs)
Pros:

- Paid version is HIPAA compliant with BAA
- Video & audio
- Works well both on WiFi and mobile internet connection
- Can be accessed with an internet web browser or downloaded on app stores
- Cross-platform so different devices can work with each other, ex. *A doctor with an iPhone can perform care with a patient on an Android phone.*

Cons:

- Not integrated into your practice management/EMR software
- Less people use or are familiar with this service compared to FaceTime or WhatsApp

[WebEx (Web, Apple devices, Android Devies, Windows PCs)](#)

Pros:

- HIPAA compliant after contacting them to get BAA
- Video & audio
- Works well both on WiFi and mobile internet connection
- Can be accessed with an internet web browser or downloaded on app stores
- Cross-platform so different devices can work with each other, ex. *A doctor with an iPhone can perform care with a patient on an Android phone.*

Cons:

- Not integrated into your practice management/EMR software
- Less people use or are familiar with this service compared to FaceTime or WhatsApp

Not HIPAA Compliant

[FaceTime (Apple iPhone, iPad and Mac computers)](#)

Pros:

- Free
- Video, audio and text
- Works well both on WiFi and mobile internet connection
- Very easy to use and large number of people use this app on a daily basis

Cons:

- Not integrated into your practice management/EMR software
- Does not work for Android phone or Windows PC user
- FaceTime is connected to your phone # or Apple ID email, so your personal information could be at risk in the future.

- Not HIPAA-compliant, so you'll have to switch to a different provider in the future

WhatsApp (Apple devices, Android devices, Windows PCs)

Pros:

- Free
- Video, audio and text
- Works well both on WiFi and mobile internet connection
- Easy to use and large number of people use this app on a daily basis
- Cross-platform so different devices can work with each other, ex. *A doctor with an iPhone can perform care with a patient on an Android phone.*

Cons:

- Not integrated into your practice management/EMR software
- Owned by Facebook, not exactly the most trusted name in privacy
- WhatsApp is connected to your phone, so your personal information could be at risk in the future.
- Requires people download, install and set up the app. Not a problem for younger patients, but elderly patients might have difficulty those steps.
- Not HIPAA-compliant, so you'll have to switch to a different provider in the future.

Skype (Apple devices, Android devices, Windows PCs)

Pros:

- Free (Skype to Skype); Paid (Skype to mobile or landline)
- Video, audio and text
- Works well both on WiFi and mobile internet connection
- Easy to use and large number of people use this app on a daily basis
- Cross-platform so different devices can work with each other, ex. *A doctor with an iPhone can perform care with a patient on an Android phone.*

Cons:

- Not integrated into your practice management/EMR software
- Requires people download, install and set up the app. Not a problem for younger patients, but elderly patients might have difficulty those steps.
- Only very expensive enterprise level plans are HIPAA-compliant, so you'll have to switch to something else in the future.

Developing a Workflow

So now you've done your coding and insurance plan homework and you better understand your telemedicine technology options. But how's the really going get implemented into your clinical routine.

The next step is to create simple and repeatable telemedicine workflow that works for you and your staff.

1. Block off 1 hour per week to get started

Unless you have additional time your schedule, it's best to start small with one hour per week and build up. At first, use this time to research and answer questions you have about coding and insurance requirements.

Once you feel up to speed on those topics and have selected a software telemedicine software, you can .

2. Create your workflow and test it out with your staff

Before rolling this service out to patients, you want to make sure you and your staff are comfortable with all steps of the "patient journey". Write out all the steps that patients will need to go through in order to schedule a virtual visit with your clinic.

Putting yourself in the patients shoes helps you better understand their perspective and you're able to make the process as simple and efficient as possible..

Test your workflow with members of your staff by having a family or staff member. Call or fill out an appointment form, make an appointment and start the videoconferencing portion of the encounter. Do as many of these as it takes until you and your staff get the hang of it.

This may sound a little time-consuming, but if you want to provide a great patient experience, there's no substitute for practice. Yeah, we're talking about practice.

If you and your team are able to handle these telemedicine tasks with your current EHR or practice management software, the workflow should be to different from a face-to-face encounter.

On the other hand, If you need to piece together a telemedicine workflow from a few different software providers, it's going to take you a bit more time. This is not an impossible task, but will require more testing and patience before getting started.

3. Build up slowly to your ideal capacity

Now it's time to get started…for real.

Unless you're super comfortable or tech savvy, stick to a couple of patient appointments per week at the beginning when you start offering this service to patients.

There's going to be learning curve and a few speed bumps along the path and that's ok. You'll get better and feel more comfortable with each virtual visit you provide.

Once you feel like you've got the hang of it, you can ramp up the service to fit the needs of you and your practice.

Promoting Your Telemedicine Service

So you're up and running with your telemedicine service, your phone should start ringing off the hook, right?

Since it's a new, very few people outside yourself and staff know that you offer telemedicine services. So you have to actively put this information out there and educate them about the service you provide and how they can schedule with you.

In order to make prospective patients more aware here are a few of ways you can spread the word about your telemedicine service offering:

Update your website

Your website is the hub of your digital marketing efforts. So it's important for current visitors and more importantly Google to know that you offer virtual visits. The more clear you are in writing about this offering the higher you will show up on the search engine results page.

I recommend a couple of changes to your website. First, create a webpage that describes in great detail your new services, the conditions you'll treat and how patients can schedule a virtual visit. Second, create a banner on your homepage that clearly spells out your new offering and links to your telemedicine webpage.

These might seem likes small changes, but if you are able to get the top result in Google for your local area or state, it could me a lot more schedule patients.

Google and Facebook Ads

Paid advertising is the quickest and most cost-effective way to promote your services and acquire patients for your telemedicine service. The two dominant players in the online advertising space are: Google and Facebook.

On Google, you have ability to show ads for your telemedicine services can surface at the top of the search results page when a prospective patient searches for terms like "online podiatrist" or "telemedicine podiatrist". These people are actively looking to schedule, so you want to be visible.

Facebook ads promote services on the biggest social network in the world. The number of people that use Facebook daily and the precise nature of their advertising platform provide a great opportunity to gain visibility for your telemedicine offering.

Since the CMS will not enforce an established relationship for patients requirement during the crisis, you are able to advertise to new patients in your entire state or each of the states where you are licensed. Once the state of emergency is over you'll need to revisit your advertising strategy as policies could revert back.

Email

If you have an email list of established patients, now is the time to get in contact with them. There is no intermediary, your email list is the best way to direct communicate to your patients.

As a medical provider in your local community, you have an opportunity to provide leadership and accurate information about COVID-19. Add links to resources from your state health department and local emergency services and volunteering opportunities.

After providing this helpful information, inform your patients that your practice is now offering telemedicine services. After testing out your systems, provide a call-to-action in the email that lets them now how they can: contact you to learn more and schedule a telemedicine appointment.

Conclusion: Telemedicine Essentials for Podiatric Physicians

Ready to start providing telemedicine services to your new and established patients? Remotely providing care is a much needed opportunity during a difficult time. This opportunity could diversify your practice's service offerings & add a source of revenue for your practice now & in the future.

I hope this guide has provided some value and helped you understand how to get started with telemedicine. If you have questions, want to share feedback or notice changes to policies/laws, don't hesitate to reach out. I will do my best to keep the guide up to date.

CONTACT ME

🦅 Podiatry Growth

www.podiatrygrowth.com

Resources

[COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions:](#) APMA, March 2020

[OCR Announces Notification of Enforcement Discretion for Telemedicine Remote Communications During the COVID-19 Nationwide Public Health Emergency](#): U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 17, 2020

[Federation of Podiatric Medical Boards](#)

[Telemedicine Policies - Board by Board Overview](#): Federation of State Medical Boards, November 2019

[Medicare Telemedicine Health Care Provider Fact Sheet](#): CMS, March 17, 2020

[Medicare Telemedicine Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)](#): CMS, March 17, 2020

[APMA Telemedicine Webinar with Dr. Jeffrey Lehrman:](#) APMA, March 17, 2020

[Telehealth: Best Consumer Healthcare Experience You've Never Tried](#): J.D. Power, October 28, 2019

[COVID-19 And Telemedicine](#): Butacci, Leardi & Werner, March 2020

About Jim McDannald, DPM

I'm a surgically trained podiatrist and digital marketing adviser. My advisory services provide the knowledge and confidence required to market your practice in an ethical, effective manner.

Let me know how I can help.

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