

Improving Telehealth for Patients With Vision or Hearing Loss

Question

What should we do to ensure our patients with vision or hearing loss can access our telehealth services?

Answer

To get the most benefit from a telehealth visit, patients with vision or hearing loss should be able to easily understand and communicate with their healthcare providers. However, they may face barriers when trying to access telehealth services.

In a survey of 488 U.S. adults who are blind, have low vision, or are deafblind, the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) found that 70 percent of them tried to use telehealth, and 57 percent of them reported obstacles in trying to do so.¹ Another AFB report indicated that most of the materials that healthcare providers give these patients are not accessible, which may result in difficulties with prescription labels, presurgery instructions, and other types of written information.²

Like patients who are blind or have limited vision, patients with hearing disabilities have different communication skills and needs. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), hospitals must provide an effective means of communication for patients, family members, and visitors who are deaf or have hearing impairment. This communication is particularly critical in healthcare settings because a misdiagnosis or improper or delayed medical treatment can occur from miscommunication.³

The federal government requires that telehealth services are accessible for patients with vision or hearing loss. In 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued [Guidance on Nondiscrimination in Telehealth: Federal Protections to Ensure Accessibility to People with Disabilities and Limited English Proficient Persons](#). Unlawful

discrimination may occur if healthcare providers do not take the necessary action to ensure their patients can access telehealth.⁴

To improve accessibility to telehealth visits for patients with vision and hearing loss, consider the following guidance:

- Review all patient documentation — such as forms, instructions, and educational content — for accessibility needs. Make sure forms include an option for patients to indicate what accommodations they might need, such as a sign language interpreter, information in braille or large print, or audio alternatives.
- Conduct a pre-telehealth visit to determine and address the patient's technology needs, ensure the patient receives accessible login instructions, troubleshoot common technology issues that may occur during the upcoming telehealth visit, provide contact information for technical support, and include instructions on how to cancel or reschedule the telehealth visit.
- Have administrative staff engage patient companions and educate them on using the telehealth platform.
- Use a telehealth platform that offers these kinds of accessible features, and ensure healthcare staff are trained on how to use these features:
 - The ability to connect and interface with interpreter services.
 - Live captions.
 - High-contrast display.
 - Automatic transcription.
 - Keyboard accessibility.
 - Low-vision capabilities such as screen magnification, contrast controls, and font resizing capabilities.
 - Screen reader functionality.
- Provide an organized real-time text transcription to give patients with vision impairment an option to zoom into text/images.

- Ensure that interpreter services and communication aids are provided to patients with disabilities and their companions free of charge. Patients with disabilities are not required to provide their own interpreter.
- Whenever possible, use certified medical interpreters. Avoid using patients' family members or friends as interpreters unless the situation is an emergency or the patient specifically requests a family member/friend as an interpreter. When patients prefer to use their own interpreters, ask them to acknowledge in writing that they are declining to use the organization's interpreter.
- Plan ahead if prescriptions and instructions to the patient need to be provided in alternative formats. Ensure the necessary professionals are aware of this to enable access.
- Be certain that patients have an accessible way (e.g., over-the-phone or video-remote interpreters) to follow up after the telehealth visit for any additional requests, questions, new appointments, feedback, or more.
- Make sure patients' requested accommodations are clearly noted and referenced to ensure they receive all communications in their preferred format.
- Make resources available in different formats (e.g., printed information, audio recordings, and braille).
- Make sure that any electronic documents are accessible to patients through document remediation services.⁵

Resources

- [North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services: Communication Guidelines Checklist for Healthcare Providers Working with DeafBlind Patients](#)
- [North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services: Telehealth Technology Options: Back-up Plan When The Telehealth Platform Does Not Provide Accessibility](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Disability Resources for Effective Communication](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Improving Access to Telehealth](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Telehealth for Providers: What You Need to Know](#)

Endnotes

¹ Diamond, F. (2088, September 8). How to make telemedicine work for visually impaired patients. *Fierce Healthcare*. Retrieved from <https://www.fiercehealthcare.com/health-tech/make-telemedicine-work-visually-impaired>

² Rosenblum, L. P., Chanes-Mora, P., McBride, C. R., Flewellen, J., Nagarajan, N., Nave Stawaz, R., & Swenor, B. (2020). Flatten inaccessibility: Impact of COVID-19 on adults who are blind or have low vision in the United States. *American Foundation for the Blind*. Retrieved from https://afb.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/AFB_Flatten_Inaccessibility_Report_Revised-march-2022.pdf?_ga=2.104723904.1374778546.1665413231-284447622.1665413231

³ U.S. Department of Justice. (n. d.). *ADA business brief: Communicating with people who are deaf or hard of hearing in hospital settings*. Retrieved from <https://archive.ada.gov/hospcombr.htm>

⁴ U. S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Justice. (2022). *Guidance on nondiscrimination in telehealth: Federal protections to ensure accessibility to people with disabilities and limited English proficient persons*. Retrieved from <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/guidance-on-nondiscrimination-in-telehealth.pdf>

⁵ Telehealth.HHS.gov. (2022, July 27 update). *Improving access to telehealth*. Retrieved from <https://telehealth.hhs.gov/providers/health-equity-in-telehealth/improving-access-to-telehealth/>; Diamond, F., *How to make telemedicine work for visually impaired patients*; Moore, M. (2022, November 16). How to make telehealth services more accessible for all patients. *Avantpage*. Retrieved from <https://avantpage.com/blog/how-to-make-telehealth-services-accessible/>

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