Virtual care in NSW

**for patients, carers,
families and the community**

This guide is designed to help people in NSW learn more about virtual care – including how it is used and their choices and options. It answers a range of frequently asked questions and provides links to more information.

The NSW Ministry for Health acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands across NSW. We acknowledge that we live and work on Aboriginal lands. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and to all Aboriginal people.

Further copies of this document can
be downloaded from the NSW Health webpage www.health.nsw.gov.au

About virtual care in NSW

Virtual care safely connects you with healthcare providers so that you can receive care when and where it is needed.
It complements the face-to-face care you are used to.

Healthcare providers have been using technology to deliver care for decades. We heard from patients and consumers they know about 'telehealth' and they have been using it to connect with their healthcare providers for many years.
We are now using the term 'virtual care' because it includes a broad range of technology and options in healthcare.

Virtual care can range from a telephone or video consultation with your healthcare provider, to sharing your tests and imaging with experts for advice. It may even involve using special devices to monitor and manage your health outside of a clinic or hospital.

In NSW, virtual care can be delivered in different ways, including:

📞 **telephone** – an audio connection between two or more people

🎥 **video conference** – video connection of two or more people allowing all participants to speak to each other, see each other and exchange information as would be normal practice during a face to face consultation.

📱 **remote monitoring** – using technology to collect and send medical data to an app, device or service

✉ **store and forward** – where a patient allows clinical information such as scans or images to be collected and sent electronically to another healthcare provider or site for assessment or management.

Benefits of virtual care

Some of the benefits of virtual care include:

· less travel time and fewer costs to attend appointments

· less disruption to your day to day life, particularly if you need to travel long distances for your appointments or find it hard to attend face to face appointments

· easier and more timely access to care – including being able to stay in your own home

How virtual care works

1. Your healthcare provider will determine if virtual care is a safe and appropriate option for you.

2. If appropriate, you can choose whether you'd like to see your healthcare provider face-to-face or virtually. Virtual care is often one part of your healthcare experience and many patients receive some of their care face-to-face and some of it virtually. It's important to remember that virtual care complements face-to-face care, but it doesn't replace it.

   We know that some people prefer face-to-face care – particularly for initial appointments, physical examinations or in the early stages of treatment. Speak to your healthcare provider about your options.

3. If you decide to receive your care over the phone or via videoconferencing, your healthcare provider will explain how it will happen and the different types of technology that you will need. They can also answer any questions you may have.

   In some circumstances, you may not have a choice about the type of care you receive. The most important thing is for you to receive the right care, from the right healthcare provider, at the right time.

Margaret's story

Margaret and her husband Peter live on the NSW mid-north coast. One evening Margaret noticed a tingling sensation in her arm that quickly progressed to weakness and numbness in her arm, up the side of her face, and problems with her vision. Margaret was having a stroke.

Peter called an ambulance and Margaret was taken to Port Macquarie Hospital. A call was made to the Telestroke service, who then contacted a Neurologist who was 315km away at Gosford Hospital.

Using Telestroke, the neurologist shared screens with Port Macquarie Hospital to view Margaret's scans. The specialist assessed the scans and determined Margaret needed surgery. She was transferred by aircraft to Newcastle.

Two days after surgery, Margaret was transferred back to her hometown and was discharged shortly after. The Telestroke service helped to save Margaret's life. It is being rolled out across hospitals in rural and regional NSW.

Learn more about the NSW Telestroke Service.
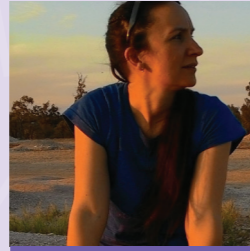
Ali's story

Ali is 43 years old and lives in regional NSW. Her closest town is 45 minutes away. Ali has had a spinal cord injury for 21 years. She also has a blood disorder and suffers from trauma related panic and anxiety.

Ali is grateful to have the option of virtual care. She believes it helps her to feel more independent and keeps her safe and well. She attends her psychology appointments over Skype and often meets with her GP over the telephone. These virtual appointments save Ali days of travel time. It also means she can stay in her home – her safe space.

"As a person living in regional Australia with complex, permanent conditions, I spend a lot of time in hospitals and clinics, with whole days gone travelling to and from appointments. There are lots of unavoidable delays and rescheduling. To be able to have some of my care done virtually is really awesome. The future of virtual care is pretty exciting!" – Ali

Learn more about Ali's story.

Learning more about patients' experiences of virtual care

In 2020, over 2,500 patients from across NSW shared their experiences of virtual care outpatient services in a NSW Health survey.

91% of the patients rated the virtual care they received as very good (69%) or good (22%)

Nine in 10 patients said they would use virtual care again

When asked to identify the benefits of virtual care, 73% said convenience, 60% said saving time and 30% said saving money.

The survey also showed the more virtual care appointments a patient had, the more positive they felt about using virtual care.

More information about this survey, including the experiences of Aboriginal and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) populations, is available on the Bureau of Health Information's website: www.bhi.nsw.gov.au/nsw_patient_survey_program/virtual_care_survey

Answering your questions about virtual care

Will I have a choice about receiving virtual care?

If virtual care is a good option for your needs, your healthcare provider may offer you a choice of face-to-face appointment or virtual care. You can then choose the option you prefer. If virtual care is not offered to you, ask your healthcare provider if it is an option.

In some cases, virtual care may be the only option for safety and quality reasons.

Is virtual care safe?

Absolutely. Safety and quality is at the centre of everything we do. Virtual care is one of the many ways we can deliver care and your healthcare provider will let you know if this type of care is safe and appropriate for you.

How secure and private is virtual care?

NSW Health's virtual care platforms have had safety reviews and testing to ensure they meet our high standards of privacy and confidentiality. NSW Health providers can only use platforms that have undergone a safety assessment.

How much will virtual care cost?

There is no cost to you when the service is from your public hospital or local health district. You may be asked to give consent for your healthcare provider to bulk bill Medicare – this is the same as you would do for face-to-face care.

Virtual care will use some of your internet data. A 15 minute video call will use approximately 80MB of your data and a 15 minute audio-only call will use approximately 10MB. Usage depends on your individual mobile, internet or home phone arrangements. Speak to your mobile phone provider if you have questions about how much data you have on your plan.

What do I need for a virtual care consultation?

Depending on the type of virtual care, it could include:
- fixed phone line
- an email address
- access to a reliable internet connection
- a suitable device with a camera, microphone and speakers – e.g. Windows or Mac computer, laptop or an Apple iPad/iPhone or Android smart phone or tablet device
- a private, well-lit area where you won't be interrupted.

If you don't have this equipment, you may be able to attend the consultation in your GP or other healthcare provider's office, or at your local community health facility or hospital.

What happens before a virtual care appointment?

You and/or your carer or family member should be given all necessary information before the appointment. This includes:
- the date and time of the appointment
- where to go (if you can't join from home)
- who will be attending the consultation
- how to set up your technology and how to begin the consultation.

The healthcare provider who made the appointment may share information (such as treatment history) with another local healthcare provider, if you give consent. This helps them to better understand your condition and the type of care you need. All your information is sent securely to ensure your privacy.

Can I involve family members or carers in my virtual care appointments – even if they aren't physically with me?

In most cases, you can involve family members and/or your carer in your virtual care appointments. Speak to your healthcare provider about how to include them.

Are virtual care services available in all NSW healthcare facilities?

Virtual care services are not available in all healthcare facilities. We are working with healthcare providers across NSW to develop more services and make virtual care more widely available where it is appropriate.

How will you support me to learn more about virtual care?

We recognise there are opportunities and challenges in using virtual care. We have heard patients want to have choice about using virtual care or in-person care; and need to feel confident to use virtual care.

We are working with a range of consumer representatives to ensure patient needs remain at the centre of everything we do. We are also planning patient education and upskilling so that you can feel confident to participate in virtual care.

Lauren Harper

More information

The NSW Health Virtual Care Strategy has been developed to guide the health system through this change. The Strategy is based on a series of principles that will guide NSW Health as it moves towards a future where virtual care is more accessible.

For more information, including other case studies and examples of virtual care, visit the NSW Health Virtual Care website: www.health.nsw.gov.au/virtualcare

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health.nsw.gov.au/virtualcare