A new study confirms the virtues of virtual medicine—here, easy ways to reap even more benefits from this versatile technology.

News: Telemedicine excels in these 3 areas

More than half of Americans used telemedicine during the pandemic, and surveys show that 86% of them were highly satisfied. But is telehealth just a stopgap measure suited only to unprecedented times? That’s the question Kathleen Fear, PhD, director of Data & Analytics at the University of Rochester Health Lab, set out to answer in a new study in NEJM Catalyst. “We wanted to learn if telemedicine is just a ‘good enough’ method of care in an emergency or is it something that could be patients’ first choice,” she says, adding she was pleasantly surprised to discover it was the latter. “The most vulnerable patients, including seniors and the underinsured, successfully used the most telehealth services.”

“We were curious if doctors would order more tests to offset the fact that they weren’t seeing patients in-person, and we were again surprised to find they ordered fewer tests,” says Fear. “This speaks to just how much of medicine is about talking to your doctor. The evidence suggests you’ll get what you need, just like at an in-person appointment.” Read on to learn the best ways to use virtual visits.

Tele-ob/gyns ask crucial questions

While pelvic exams require in-person visits, virtual gynecology shines when it comes to other reasons to “see” your doctor. “Telemedicine can make it easier to discuss intimate topics like pain during intercourse,” says gynecologist Mary Jane Minkin, MD, a clinical professor at the Yale School of Medicine. Indeed, one study found only 40% of gynecologists regularly ask about sexual issues. But telemedicine can fill this gap. “We can also involve a patient’s partner more easily online to talk about topics like orgasming.” Another symptom suited to telegynecology? “I almost never see anyone in-person for a UTI,” she says, adding that patients describe their symptoms virtually and she sends them to a lab for tests, if needed.

Tele-therapy is more sustainable

“We’ve known for over a decade that mental healthcare over just the phone—let alone via video—is effective,” says psychologist Colleen Stiles-Shields, PhD, of the University of Illinois, Chicago. Telemental healthcare also removes one of the biggest barriers to therapy: sustainability. Unlike other types of medical care, mental health typically requires 10 to 20 sessions. Its ongoing nature arguably makes long-term accessibility critical. “Virtual visits reduce barriers like the need to find childcare or eldercare.”

Even more convenient, says psychiatrist John Torous, MD, of Harvard Medical School: a website like MindApps.org. “It lets you easily pick a mental health app, vetted by experts, based on what’s most important to you, from a free option to a specific strategy like mindfulness.”

Tele-derms make screening easy

“The satisfaction with teledermatology for both patients and doctors is quite high,” confirms Sarah Perkins, MD, a dermatologist in Yale Medicine’s Department of Dermatology. In fact, research shows almost 60% of patients want to continue virtual visits in the wake of the pandemic. One of the biggest advantages of virtual dermatology is your phone’s camera: “If a patient has a history of skin cancer and sees a new spot on her arm, she can send me a photo and ask, ‘Do I need to come in?’ Depending on the quality of the image, I can often determine if I need to see her now or if it can wait till her checkup.” To maximize your photos, get close to a window to take advantage of natural light or snap several angles of a mole or lesion.