Telehealth for Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD) Treatment: Observations from Before and During the Pandemic

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November 3, 2021
Under treatment of substance use disorder (SUD)

• Only a small minority of Americans with SUD, including about 14.5 million with AUD, receive treatment in a given year

• Many factors drive this treatment gap, including the shortage of SUD providers, particularly in rural areas

• Many have suggested that telehealth could be a way to improve access to treatment for AUD and other SUD
Use of tele-behavioral health visits was increasing rapidly before the COVID-19 pandemic but was still relatively uncommon.

![Graph showing the increase in tele-SUD and tele-MH visits per 1,000 individuals from 2010 to 2017.](source: Huskamp, et al Health Affairs 2018)
Impacts of COVID: Dramatic Shift to Telehealth

• On March 17, 2020, CMS announced expanded telehealth coverage due to pandemic

• Regulatory barriers to telehealth use were removed

• Many clinicians began using telehealth for first time

• Since pandemic onset, alcohol consumption, including heavy, binge, or problematic use, has increased
Dramatic decline and then rebound in total outpatient visits (telehealth + in-person, for all types of care) during 2020

https://doi.org/10.26099/bvhf-e411
Rapid rise in use of telehealth overall, followed by decline and plateauing

https://doi.org/10.26099/yaqe-q550
Use of telehealth in December 2020 much greater for behavioral health than other specialties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialty</th>
<th>Telemedicine visits as a percentage of baseline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral health</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endocrinology</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neurology</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rheumatology</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gastroenterology</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anesthesiology</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulmonology</td>
<td>13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult primary care</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pediatrics</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allergy/Immunology</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oncology</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urgent Care</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cardiology</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urology</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical medicine &amp; rehab</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dermatology</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surgery</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obstetrics/Gynecology</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthopedics</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otolaryngology</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podiatry</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ophthalmology</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mehrotra et al., Commonwealth Fund, Aug. 2020.
https://doi.org/10.26099/yaqe-q550
% of AUD Visits by Primary Care Providers and by Mental Health Specialists that were Delivered Via Telehealth among Enrollees with Private Insurance, January 2020 through June 2021
% of AUD Group Therapy Visits and Individual Therapy Visits Delivered Via Telehealth among Enrollees with Private Insurance, January 2020 through June 2021
Use of AUD Outpatient Care in 2020 vs. 2019 for Individuals Diagnosed in Previous Year

Use of Any AUD Outpatient Visits

Use of Any AUD Psychotherapy

Use of Any AUD Group Therapy

Use of Any AUD Individual Therapy
Concern that “digital divide” will limit use of telehealth among certain populations

Assessment of Disparities in Digital Access Among Medicare Beneficiaries and Implications for Telemedicine. JAMA Internal Medicine. 2020

% of Medicare beneficiaries without digital access

- Non-Hispanic White
- Non-Hispanic Black
- Hispanic
- Income as a percentage of FPL
  - <100
  - 100 - <200
  - 200 - <300
  - 300 - <400
  - 400+

Harvard Medical School
Department of Health Care Policy
Clinician perspectives of telehealth in SUD and mental health care

Compared to in-person visits, does telehealth meet patients’ needs equally well or better?

- Evaluation & Management: 60%
- Initial Assessment: 40%
- Individual Therapy: 50%
- Group Therapy: 30%
- Family Therapy: 20%

Use of telehealth for OUD care among buprenorphine waived clinicians

- On average, 57% of OUD visits delivered via telehealth
- Clinicians with more:
  - OUD patients used more telehealth
  - Medicaid/uninsured patients used more audio-only

Buprenorphine waived clinicians’ views of telehealth use post-pandemic

- Most (70%) preferred return to in-person care for majority of visits.

- Yet, 95% thought telehealth should continue to be offered in some form.

- Most (80%) would continue to offer telehealth if reimbursement were the same as in-person.

- Only 40% would continue if reimbursement were 25% lower.

Some Key Issues

• What is the optimal role for telehealth in AUD treatment?
• What reimbursement policies support that role?
  • Parity for in-person vs. telemedicine visits?
  • Telephone only telehealth visits?
  • Digital health options (e.g., online recovery groups, apps)?
• Will licensure restrictions create obstacles to that role?