Connect2Health FCC Consumer Tips

Broadband-Enabled Health Technologies Can Reduce Costs and Improve Care for People With Disabilities

People with disabilities often have unique medical needs and may require a team of specialists to provide optimal care. For example, someone with limited mobility may need close monitoring for blood clot risks or may benefit from remote physical therapy. By some estimates, people with disabilities are the highest users of health care services, with their care accounting for a significant percentage of our national health care costs. There are many ways telehealth can make a difference:

Increasing Access: Transportation can be a critical issue for access to health care. Some studies estimate that adults with disabilities are twice as likely as those without disabilities to have inadequate transportation. And, the challenge is not just about access to surface transportation; with certain disabilities, even leaving home can be difficult. In addition, the elderly may face a unique combination of access barriers because of disability, illness or the need for more frequent visits to the doctor. Telehealth can help increase access to care for people who are confined to their homes due to mobility or other limitations, who live in rural or medically underserved locations, and who lack essential transportation.

Monitoring Complex Conditions: Telehealth technology is increasingly being used to monitor patients right at home and identify potential health complications in real time. Broadband-enabled sensors can help ensure that medications are taken properly – a valuable assist for people who are blind or low-vision. The New England Healthcare Institute found that not taking medications as prescribed leads to poorer health, more frequent hospitalization, a higher risk of death and costs as much as $290 billion annually. Sensors installed in a home also can inform doctors and caregivers about activity patterns and sleep quality and assist in fall prevention. In the case of an emergency, live transmissions from sensor data can be sent to appropriate medical specialists allowing for timely intervention. For example, the ability for a deaf or hard of hearing person to transmit a coded emergency call through an accessible, wearable device can be the difference between life and death.

Helping Children with Special Needs: Children with special needs often require an interdisciplinary team to address medical, developmental and behavioral problems. Telehealth is being used in various contexts from addressing neurodevelopmental disorders (such as cerebral palsy) to emotional and behavioral problems. Services offered through telehealth can include tele-psychiatry, family education and consultations with multiple providers. For example, children with disabilities are at an increased risk of being bullied. Any number of factors—physical vulnerability, social skill challenges, or intolerant environments—may increase the risk, and the need for mental health services may be more immediate. Given the shortage of child psychiatrists nationwide, telehealth has led to increased access to specialty care for vulnerable populations.

Aiding Veterans: The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the military are using telemedicine to aid in treatment, rehabilitation and recovery of combat-wounded soldiers. One area of focus has been to use these technologies to treat traumatic brain injuries (TBI). The VA has been able to offer neurosurgical treatments, psychiatric interventions, behavioral therapies, and physical rehabilitation through telemedicine. This has improved both physical and cognitive outcomes of patients with TBI and helped reduce the risk of secondary injuries for patients in the wake of TBI specialist shortages.

Want to Know More? The Connect2HealthFCC Task Force is working to raise consumer awareness about the value of broadband in the health and care sectors. For more information, visit www.fcc.gov/health or www.fcc.gov/consumers.

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