

The Future of Virtual Care: Predictions, Challenges and Opportunities



Take a trip back to 2019 and the idea of virtual care was seen as “the future of healthcare,” with a slow and varied adoption. Then COVID-19 hit, breaking every healthcare process, and enabling the utilization of telemedicine at increased rates. Since the start of COVID-19, telehealth utilization has increased 38x; with a recent survey of healthcare executives believing the shift to virtual healthcare is here to stay.¹

The question: What’s to stop the virtual care trend from reversing once safety restrictions are lifted, vaccination rates increase, and life returns to “normal” (whatever that means)?

The answer: A virtual care experience that’s meaningful and better than the status quo.

For employers and health plans, this means building the right strategy and partnering with the right virtual care provider to deliver a completely reimagined healthcare experience. While telehealth and virtual urgent care served people when they needed it most during COVID-19, a tailored healthcare experience

has been lacking in the traditional healthcare model. Over the next one to five years you may see virtual care offerings become truly differentiated and aligned to what companies find most valuable. And while we believe virtual care can continue to fulfill its promise of being the “future of healthcare,” we also know that won’t happen in a vacuum.

Predictions, Challenges and Opportunities for Virtual Care

At Included Health, we deliver integrated virtual care and navigation. We believe that the future of healthcare is comprehensive and convenient, and provides patients with high-quality care and expertise whether that’s delivered in-person or virtually. Our mission is to raise the standard of healthcare for everyone. And as we advance that mission we’ve also outlined four predictions below, as well as challenges and opportunities that may arise with the future of virtual care and its critical role in healthcare.

¹Telehealth: A quarter-trillion-dollar post-COVID-19 reality? McKinsey (July 2021)

1 The transformation of care delivery

Healthcare costs are rising at 6% every year, faster than both wages and inflation, and yet members continue to face poor health outcomes.^{2,3} In order to provide meaningful impact, employers and health plans must ensure their virtual care benefits are informed by data, supported by ecosystems within an interconnected offering, and provide a seamless, integrated experience across the entire continuum of care. Multiple entry points should be deeply integrated so members receive the care they need at the right time. Otherwise, virtual care will fall down the same path as the legacy experience—often fragmented, plagued with miscommunication, and resulting in a poor member experience.

2 Better virtual navigation to the right care

Within the past two years, consumers and businesses have been forced to adapt—from video meetings to mobile orders, and the healthcare experience is no different. Members have grown to appreciate (and expect) the convenience, comfort, and experience of virtual visits, and are expected to continue to seek virtual appointments for many types of healthcare needs.¹

The next few years will set employers and health plans on an important path forward: determining how separate (or integrated) to keep medical, behavioral, and wellbeing benefits. And we believe the most progressive employers and health plans may move to a virtual-first benefits ecosystem, orienting plan design, member services, and navigation around a virtual care provider.

²Eliminating Waste in US Health Care. JAMA (April 2012)

³Characteristics of Americans With Primary Care and Changes Over Time, 2002-2015. JAMA (December 2019)

3 High-touch, personalized experiences delivered at scale

A one-size-fits-all approach to healthcare has led to widening inequities and distrust of the healthcare system.⁴ For those who have been historically marginalized or unwelcomed by healthcare, now is the time for employers and health plans to get things right. We believe the future of healthcare will be data-driven, affirming and culturally competent. It will be disease-specific and a high-touch experience for individuals, but it also must be delivered at scale.

4 Outcomes are the expectation, not the exception

Virtual care must be held to the same clinical standards as in-person care. It is no longer enough for virtual care to only be convenient for patients, it must also deliver improved clinical outcomes, reduce unnecessary spend, and meaningfully improve the patient experience.

Virtual primary care has the ability to provide longitudinal, relationship-driven healthcare to manage chronic conditions, holistic care for a patient's total health, and build loyalty and satisfaction for the employer and health plan.

The past two years have taken a toll on the mental health and wellbeing of many—from individual employees to leaders. And for some employers and health plans, the focus has been (rightfully) on other areas of business operations and not looking into new, innovative benefit partners. However, focusing only on the near-term, or not taking the opportunity to evaluate new strategic options, could result in increased fragmentation, vendors not fully delivering on their promises, and failure to push forward to realize the future.

⁴Understanding and Ameliorating Medical Mistrust Among Black Americans. The Commonwealth Fund (January 2021)

Included Health is a new kind of healthcare company, delivering integrated virtual care and navigation. We're on a mission to raise the standard of healthcare for everyone. We are the only complete, integrated healthcare delivery platform designed to support the unique healthcare journey of each person. We offer our members care guidance, advocacy, and access to personalized virtual and in-person care for everyday and urgent care, primary care, behavioral health, and specialty care. It's all included. [Learn more at includedhealth.com](https://www.includedhealth.com).