



Telehealth frequently asked questions

Health professionals and residential aged care facilities

The following questions and answers are to help service officers answer questions from health professionals and residential aged care facilities relating to telehealth. The questions are divided into the following categories:

- General questions
- Eligibility
- Specialists, consultant physicians and psychiatrists
- Supporting health professionals
- Telehealth incentives
- Billing and claiming
- Residential aged care services.

General questions

Why has the Australian Government introduced telehealth?

Telehealth has been introduced under the *Connecting Health Services With the Future: Modernising Medicare by Providing Rebates for Online Consultations* 2010 election commitment.

It is an important part of the Government's broader agenda to remove barriers to access medical services, in particular specialist, consultant physician and psychiatrist consultations, for Australians living outside major cities.

Patients using telehealth facilities located in general practices, eligible residential aged care facilities and Aboriginal Medical Services will be able to 'see' specialists without the time and expense involved in travelling to major cities, in many cases sooner than would otherwise be the case.

What does telehealth cover and is it claimable from Medicare?

From 1 July 2011, a new range of Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) rebates and incentives will be available for telehealth video consultations with medical specialists. More information is available at www.mbsonline.gov.au

What is a telehealth video consultation?

A telehealth video consultation is when a patient and eligible specialist, consultant physician or psychiatrist undertakes a consultation via video conferencing equipment. The health professional and patient must be able to see and talk to each other.

Who can provide these consultations?

These consultations can be provided by specialists, consultant physicians or psychiatrists. The patient can be supported by their GP, nurse practitioner, midwife, Aboriginal health worker or practice nurse during their video consultation.

Can telehealth consultations be claimed through the Department of Veterans' Affairs?

Yes.

Are there any financial incentives provided to health professionals to encourage the uptake of telehealth consultations?

Yes. Health professionals who are eligible to claim the telehealth MBS items will also be eligible for financial incentives. More information is available at www.mbsonline.gov.au

What are the privacy requirements?

The general privacy requirements for video consultations, relating to confidentiality, patient consent and security of patient information and medical records, are the same as for face-to-face consultations.

Video consultations bring a new dimension to privacy requirements given that they involve the transmission of sound, images and other data relating to the consultation.

Video consultations should be conducted using secure infrastructure or encryption. If the possibility of third party interception exists, the patient should be told and asked for their consent to proceed.

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Eligibility

How do I know if I am providing patient consultations in an eligible geographical location?

The specialist or consultant can be located anywhere in Australia, but the location of the patient at the time of the consultation must be in an area outside an inner metropolitan area. This is referred to as an eligible telehealth area.

Exception: if the patient is an approved care recipient of a residential aged care facility or a patient at an Aboriginal Medical Service they can be located anywhere in Australia.

Static maps of eligible geographical areas are available at www.mbsonline.gov.au

Dynamic maps are also available to search exact street locations at www.doctorconnect.gov.au

Does an eligible geographical location relate to where the patient lives or location of the patient service?

Eligibility is determined by the location of the patient at the time of the consultation. This could be at the patient's home, a GP practice or other eligible location with suitable video conferencing equipment.

Where can a telehealth service be performed?

The specialist or consultant can be located anywhere in Australia, but the location of the patient at the time of the consultation must be in an area outside an inner metropolitan area. This is referred to as an eligible telehealth area.

Exception: if the patient is an approved care recipient of a residential aged care facility or a patient at an Aboriginal Medical Service they can be located anywhere in Australia.

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Why are video consultations being restricted to certain geographical areas?

Telehealth aims to improve access to specialist consultations for Australians who, because of geographical barriers, have less access to specialists. People in rural and regional areas currently have fewer consultations per head of population.

The initiative also recognises the barriers experienced by the less mobile and disadvantaged. This is why Medicare benefits will be available Australia wide for services to approved residents in eligible residential aged care facilities and patients receiving services at an Aboriginal Medical Service.

Can telehealth consultations be conducted in a patient's home?

Yes. A telehealth service can be conducted in a patient's home if the specialist considers it is clinically appropriate and the patient's home is located outside an inner metropolitan area. The patient must be supported at their home by an eligible health professional.

Who is eligible to provide specialist telehealth consultations?

A health professional who is registered or authorised to practise (as described in the *Health Insurance Act 1973*), as a consultant physician, psychiatrist or specialist.

Who is eligible to support a telehealth service?

A registered medical practitioner, midwife or nurse practitioner who has a Medicare provider number linked to an eligible patient location can provide a MBS telehealth support service. In addition, a practice nurse or Aboriginal health worker can provide a telehealth support service on behalf of a medical practitioner, to a patient located in an eligible geographical area.

Can a non admitted patient use a hospital's equipment for a video consultation?

Yes. As long as the location of the patient is in an eligible area.

Are admitted hospital patients eligible for telehealth consultations?

No. Medicare benefits are not payable for telehealth video consultations with an admitted hospital patient. This applies to both public and private admitted patients.

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Specialists, consultant physicians and psychiatrists

How does a specialist know if they are eligible to provide telehealth consultations?

All specialists, consultant physicians and psychiatrists are eligible to provide telehealth video conferencing consultations. All patients must be in eligible telehealth areas except approved care residents of eligible residential aged care services and patients in Aboriginal Medical Services.

The eligible specialist, consultant physician or psychiatrist must be satisfied that it is clinically appropriate to provide that consultation by video conference.

Can I only provide a telehealth service from my consultation room?

A video consultation can be provided from any location in Australia.

Can I provide a telehealth service by phone or email?

No. The new MBS telehealth consultations are not payable for telephone or email consultations. There must be a visual and audio link between the patient and the specialist, consultant physician or psychiatrist in order to bill a telehealth item.

Can a specialist or consultant provide a video consultation to multiple patients at once?

No. The legislation requires attendance by a health professional on a single patient on a single occasion.

It is possible to provide consultations to multiple patients consecutively during a single video link, but need to be separate consultations.

How do I write a prescription for the patient if I'm not co-located?

Supporting health professionals can provide prescriptions ordered by specialists during a video consultation.

If the drug to be prescribed can only be ordered by an eligible specialist, consultant physician or psychiatrist, or if a supporting health professional is not involved in the video consultation, they can mail a prescription to the patient or the patient's pharmacist.

Can I order tests for the patient?

Yes. You can order pathology and diagnostic imaging tests, just like in a face-to-face consultation. The arrangements for ordering tests could vary between email, fax, mail and/or in consultation with the supporting health professional.

Are there any special billing requirements for telehealth consultations?

Yes. All video consultations provided by an eligible specialist, consultant physician or psychiatrist are to be separately billed. Only the relevant telehealth MBS derived item and the associated consultation item are to be itemised on the account/bill.

How do I bulk bill my patient when they are not present?

How you bill your patient is up to you and what works best for you and your practice.

If you use electronic claiming channels you can seek verbal consent from the patient during the video consultation to assign the benefit to you. You can then lodge the bulk bill claim electronically directly to Medicare. In this instance, you may wish to record within your clinical notes that verbal consent to assign the benefit was provided by the patient and a copy of the Electronic Claim Lodgement Advice is forwarded to the patient for their records.

If you use paper based claiming you can request that the supporting practitioner complete the bulk bill voucher on your behalf, have the patient sign and then forward the voucher to you for manual lodgement with Medicare. The patient's copy is then sent to them.

As a specialist or consultant, how do I bill my patient when we are not in the same place? How will the patient pay me for the service?

Billing arrangements are flexible and can be negotiated between specialists and patients, or between specialists and host facilities. Supporting health professionals bill as they normally would a face-to-face consultation.

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Will my indemnity premiums go up if I provide online video consultations?

The Department of Health and Ageing advises that indemnity premiums will not be affected by performing video consultations. Insurers have indicated they will monitor the level of consultations provided as is normal for any new aspect of medical practice.

Are there any changes to the case conferencing items?

No. Case conferencing items remain unchanged and are not eligible for telehealth benefits and incentives.

Will there be training available on how to undertake a video consultation?

Yes. Information about training for video consultations will be available from www.mbsonline.gov.au as well as some medical colleges, associations and professional organisation websites.

What are the technical requirements for an online specialist consultation? Can I share equipment and still get an incentive payment?

In order for an eligible specialist, consultant physician or psychiatrist to bill an MBS item they must have a visual and audio link with the patient through video conferencing equipment.

The Government is not prescribing technical requirements and cannot recommend one IT system over another. For more information about technical issues go to www.mbsonline.gov.au

You can also talk to with your professional college to see if there are any requirements and/or recommendations for appropriate equipment for a telehealth consultation.

Can a non-admitted patient use a hospital's equipment for a video consultation?

Yes.

Are admitted hospital patients eligible for telehealth consultations?

No. Medicare benefits are not payable for telehealth video consultations with an admitted hospital patient.

Supporting health professionals

How do I refer for a video consultation?

The referral procedure for a video consultation is the same as conventional face-to-face consultations. There is no special documentation needed.

Where can I undertake a video consultation?

In most cases it is expected that video consultations will be provided from a medical facility such as a general practice, Aboriginal Medical Service, or eligible residential aged care service. In more remote areas, video consultations may be supported in a range of other locations, including patients' homes.

Does the supporting practitioner need to take clinical notes of the consultation?

Yes. The supporting health professional should record the clinical notes of the video consultation.

Can I support my patient during a telehealth service at the patient's home?

Yes. A telehealth service can be conducted in a patient's home if it is clinically appropriate for a health professional to support the consultation in a patient's home and if it is located outside an inner metropolitan area.

Does the patient have to be located in Australia?

Yes. Medicare benefits are only payable for professional consultations provided to a patient in Australia.

Does the specialist have to be located in Australia?

Yes.

As a supporting health professional, do I need to be present for the whole video consultation?

No. The supporting health professional does not need to be present for the entire consultation, only as long as is clinically relevant. The MBS item for the supporting health professional will be determined by the total time spent assisting the patient.

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Can I provide a telehealth support service if I am a locum practitioner?

Yes. If you are located in an eligible telehealth area and you have a provider number for that location, you will be able to provide a telehealth support service.

Can a practice nurse or Aboriginal health worker support the patient during a video consultation?

Yes. A practice nurse or an Aboriginal health worker can support a patient during the video consultation with an eligible specialist, consultant physician or psychiatrist, on behalf of a medical practitioner. A new MBS item has been introduced so this can be billed to Medicare.

How do I decide when a telehealth MBS support item can be billed?

As with any MBS item, it is up to the individual health professional to determine if the service is clinically relevant. They will need to consider whether the service and course of treatment requires the patient to be physically examined, and if so, if the examination can appropriately be carried out by a supporting health professional.

Can two MBS items be billed for a consult, for example, by a medical practitioner and by a practice nurse on the same occasion?

No. Only one telehealth MBS support item is payable per patient video conference consultation.

The supporting health professional may seek assistance from a practice nurse or Aboriginal health worker but only one item is billable for the patient's consultation with the specialist.

The health professional must be present during part or all of the consultation in order to bill an appropriate time-tiered MBS item. Any time spent by another health professional called to assist with the consultation may not be counted against the overall time taken to complete the telehealth consultation.

Can I bill a MBS service for supporting my patient during a telehealth video consultation with a specialist?

Yes. New MBS items will be available for medical practitioners, participating nurse practitioners and midwives, practice nurses and Aboriginal health workers to provide clinical support to a patient during a specialist video consultation. More information on the MBS item numbers is available at www.mbsonline.gov.au

Can I bill a face-to-face consultation with my patient on the same day a video consultation has been provided and billed?

Yes. It is acknowledged that a patient may need a face-to-face consultation by their referring doctor or by the specialist, consultant physician or psychiatrist on the same day a telehealth service is provided. You will need to provide the time of each consultation on the patient's account or bulk billing voucher.

Can I bulk bill my patient for a telehealth service?

Yes. All health professionals are encouraged to bulk bill their patients for telehealth consultations, where the patient may receive two bills, one from their specialist and a second if supported practitioner health professional.

Are there any changes to the existing telepsychiatry items?

No. Telepsychiatry items remain unchanged. These items do not attract a telehealth incentive payment.

The existing psychiatrist consultation items have been enabled for video conferencing and will attract the incentive payment.

As a supporting health professional, what do I bill if I am not present throughout the total video consultation?

The patient support MBS items for health professionals are based on time and the item billed should represent the total time spent with the patient during the video consultation.

Can there be multiple video consultations provided on the same day?

Yes. Medicare benefits may be paid for more than one video consultation for a patient on the same day, provided the second (and any following) video consultations are not a continuation of the initial or earlier video consultations. The times of each consultation need to be recorded on the patient's account or bulk billing voucher.

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Telehealth incentives

Who is eligible to receive financial incentives?

Telehealth incentives are available to health professionals who are eligible to bill MBS telehealth items. Residential aged care facilities will also receive incentive payments for hosting telehealth video conferences.

What are the incentive payments for?

Medicare Australia recognises that incorporating telehealth into everyday work is a significant change from traditional practice, that may affect billing, scheduling and IT systems and require additional staff training. Incentive payments encourage and compensate health professionals for these changes.

What do telehealth incentive payments consist of?

An on board incentive will be paid when the first MBS telehealth service has been processed and paid by Medicare Australia. This is a one-off single payment per health professional.

Service based incentive payments will also be provided for every telehealth MBS item processed. An additional amount will be payable where the service is bulk billed. These incentives will be paid quarterly to the health professional.

More information on the telehealth incentives (including payment rates) is available at www.mbsonline.gov.au

Is there a minimum or maximum number of consultations for an incentive payment?

No. The Telehealth Service Incentive is accrued for each occasion that a Medicare benefit is paid for a telehealth MBS item. Payments will be paid quarterly.

If no bank account details are recorded for the health professional at the location where the service is provided, this will need to be supplied to Medicare Australia in order to receive the payment.

What are the incentive payment amounts?

The incentive payment amounts can be found in the telehealth program guidelines available at www.mbsonline.gov.au

When will I receive these incentive payments?

The on board incentive payment will be paid to each health professional with a provider number when the first telehealth MBS item is processed and paid by Medicare.

The Telehealth Service Incentive will be paid quarterly and will be based on the number of telehealth services processed and paid by Medicare Australia within that quarter.

How many on board incentives payments can I receive if I have multiple provider numbers?

A health professional may hold one or more provider number, but will be considered as a single provider and will be eligible for only one on-board payment.

How will I receive these incentive payments?

You will receive these payments directly into your bank account via Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT). If no EFT details are recorded for the provider at the location where the telehealth service is provided, this will need to be supplied to Medicare Australia.

If a telehealth MBS item is bulk billed will I receive any additional payments?

Yes. You will receive a higher incentive amount for a bulk billed service. This will be included in the quarterly Telehealth Service Incentive payment. See the telehealth program guidelines on www.mbsonline.gov.au for the value of the incentives

Can I claim for the additional bulk bill incentive?

Yes. In addition to the extra bulk billing incentive, eligible health professionals can also claim Item 10990 or Item 10991 where they meet the requirements of those items.

Does GST apply to incentive payments?

No. Incentive payments are not subject to the Goods and Services Tax (GST).

Are health professionals audited on how they spend the incentive payments?

No. There will not be audits on how incentive payments are spent. Incentive payments are intended to encourage a change in behaviour.

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You may, however, be audited on your eligibility to receive an incentive payment. If you have received an incentive payment inappropriately, you will have to repay it.

Does Medicare Australia have my bank account details?

If you currently use electronic claiming or have previously provided your banking details, Medicare Australia will have your details recorded

How do I register my banking details with Medicare Australia?

To register your bank account details fill in the *Provider registration for EFT payments* form at www.medicareaustralia.gov.au then **For health professionals > Forms, publications and statistics > Medicare forms > EFT payments for claims**

Can I receive these incentive payments by cheque?

No

Can I use a bank account that I use for other incentive payments?

Telehealth incentive payments will be paid into the bank account that is registered to the provider number against which the telehealth item number was paid.

What will happen if I do not have banking details registered with Medicare Australia?

Medicare Australia will hold your incentive payments until you register your bank account details

Billing and claiming

Will a Medicare benefit be paid for a video consultation?

Yes. MBS items will be available from 1 July 2011. Item descriptors can be found at www.mbsonline.gov.au

What is the Medicare schedule fee for a specialist video consultation?

The schedule fee for a telehealth video consultation is based on two MBS items—the existing specialist item and a telehealth item which derives its schedule fee as an additional 50 per cent of the base (existing) item. More information can be found at www.mbsonline.gov.au

How have the Medicare fees been set for telehealth consultations?

The telehealth schedule fees have been developed in consultation with the Telehealth Advisory Group comprised of key stakeholders and consumer groups.

The fees for specialists, consultant physicians, psychiatrists and supporting health professionals are relative to existing MBS fees for these professional groups.

Why is the benefit higher than for a face-to-face consultation?

The increased telehealth schedule fee is due to the infrastructure and administrative costs of providing a video consultation in comparison to a face-to-face consultation.

I am a specialist/consultant physician/consultant psychiatrist. Are there any special billing requirements for telehealth consultations?

Yes. All telehealth consultations are to be billed separately. Only the telehealth MBS derived item and the associated telehealth consultation item is to be detailed on the account or lodged on the claim. For example, Item 105 plus Item 99 only.

Any other service should be detailed in a separate invoice or lodged in a separate claim.

I am a medical practitioner/nurse practitioner/midwife/practice nurse/Aboriginal health worker. Are there any special billing requirements for telehealth consultations?

No. You can lodge your telehealth claims to Medicare with other MBS item numbers, either using bulk bill or, you can itemise the patients account with other MBS item numbers.

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I am a specialist/consultant physician/consultant psychiatrist. Can I use electronic claiming?

You can lodge your telehealth claims using Medicare Online but not Medicare Easyclaim.

Can I use electronic claiming to lodge a bulk bill claim?

Yes. At the time of the consultation, you can seek verbal consent from the patient to assign the benefit to you. You can then lodge the bulk bill claim directly to Medicare on behalf of the patient. A copy of the lodgement advice must be forwarded to the patient for their records.

Can I use electronic claiming to lodge a patient claim on behalf of the patient?

Yes. The same rules apply as for bulk billing. You can get consent from the patient at the time of the consultation and a copy of the lodgment advice must be sent to the patient.

Residential aged care services

What do I need to do to provide telehealth video consultations?

A residential aged care service can register as an eligible facility if they have an appropriate room and equipment to facilitate a video consultation. A service will need to register with Medicare Australia and provide reports on telehealth hosted consultations in order to receive Telehealth Hosting Service Incentive payments.

What is an eligible residential aged care service?

An eligible telehealth facility:

- provides care and accommodation to residents under the *Aged Care Act 1997*
- has appropriate videoconferencing equipment and room(s) to undertake a telehealth consultation
- is registered with Medicare Australia.

How do I register to be an eligible residential aged care service to host telehealth services?

A residential aged care service will need to register with Medicare Australia and provide reports on telehealth hosting consultations provided in order to receive Telehealth Hosting Service Incentive payments. Registration details can be found at www.medicareaustralia.gov.au then **For health professionals > Incentives and allowances > Telehealth**

How do I know if an aged care service is in an eligible geographical area?

All residential aged care services, regardless of location, are able to host telehealth consultations.

Will residential aged care services receive any other payment for providing a telehealth service?

Yes. You will receive two incentive payments—a one-off On Board Incentive and an ongoing Telehealth Hosting Service Incentive.

When will the residential aged care service receive the incentive payments?

The one-off On Board Incentive payment will be paid to each residential aged care service upon lodgement of the *Residential Aged Care Services Application for On Board Incentive Payment* form which confirms that you have hosted your first telehealth consultation.

The Telehealth Hosting Service Incentive payment will be paid to each residential aged care service upon lodgement of the *Residential Aged Care Service Application for Telehealth Hosting Service Incentive Payment* form which confirms the number of telehealth consultations your service has hosted of the month.

Both of these incentive amounts are paid with your monthly aged care services payments.

Is there training available on how to undertake a video consultation?

Yes. More information about training for video consultations will be available on www.mbsonline.gov.au from some medical colleges, associations and professional organisation websites.

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Technical requirements

I'm not on the National Broadband Network—can I still provide a telehealth consultation?

Yes. As long as you can fulfill the requirements of the item descriptor you can undertake a video consultation.

How can I get technical support?

You can talk to your professional college to see if there are any requirements or recommendations they have for appropriate equipment for a telehealth consultation.

For more information email mbstelehealth@health.gov.au

What are the privacy requirements?

The general privacy requirements for video consultations, relating to confidentiality, patient consent, security of patient information and medical records are the same as for conventional face-to-face consultations.

Video consultations bring a new dimension to privacy requirements given that they involve the transmission of sound, images and other data relating to the consultation.

Video consultations should be conducted using secure infrastructure or encryption. If the possibility of third party interception exists, the patient should be told and asked for their consent to proceed.

What if there are technical problems during the video consultation. Can I finish the consult by phone and still bill a Medicare telehealth service?

Medicare Australia acknowledges that substantial time and resources are required to schedule a video consultation. In some circumstances, technical difficulties may require the video consultation be aborted (equipment malfunction).

In this circumstance, you can complete the consultation using audio only (for example, by telephone). You are permitted to bill a telehealth MBS item provided the service meets the item descriptor.

A video link has been established but there is no sound. Can I use the telephone for sound in this instance?

Yes. In order to be considered an eligible telehealth service, both audio and video must be connected. This may use one technology, for example, audio enabled video conferencing or multiple, for example, video conferencing plus telephone.