



Better Access Telehealth initiative for rural and remote patients

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Better Access Telehealth initiative?

Medical Benefits Schedule (MBS) telehealth services introduced on a temporary basis in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are now permanent. This means that eligible Australians can access telehealth (video and telephone), regardless of their location, and where it is safe and clinically appropriate to do so. The same limits with respect to the number of services available in a calendar year still apply.

Services which attract a Medicare benefit under the Better Access initiative can be delivered by the following eligible health practitioners:

- psychologists (clinical and registered);
- occupational therapists;
- social workers;
- general practitioners (GPs); and
- prescribed medical practitioners (PMPs).

When did the telehealth initiative commence?

The telehealth initiative commenced on 1 November 2017. From 1 September 2018, Medicare changes took effect so that all allowable sessions can be conducted via videoconference. From 1 November 2018, further changes to Medicare allowed eligible GPs and PMPs to deliver focussed psychological strategies to eligible patients located in Modified Monash Model areas 4 -7 via videoconference.

From 30 March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone was able to access both individual and group therapy services via telehealth. These telehealth services were made permanently available on 1 January 2022.

What is a telehealth eligible area?

The MBS telehealth items are available for a wide range of allied mental health consultations. All Medicare eligible patients, including those in rural, remote and very remote locations, can receive these services where a face-to-face consultation is not available, and it is clinically appropriate and safe to do so.

Group therapy can also be delivered via telehealth in certain circumstances. To be eligible for group therapy services via telehealth, the patient must be located in a [Modified Monash Model area 4-7](#) at the time of the consultation, and at least 15 kilometres apart by road from the allied health professional delivering the session. More information about the Modified Monash Model, including a search tool to identify the classification of a specific location, is available at: [Modified Monash Model](#).

Why is this telehealth initiative needed?

Better Access Telehealth services were introduced to enhance ease of access to, and increase choice in, mental health services in rural and remote areas of Australia. It is widely recognised that there is a scarcity of mental health professionals in some of the more remote areas of Australia, and this can act as a significant barrier for those who need to access these services.

The demand for mental health services in rural and regional Australia is growing. Enhanced telehealth arrangements enable patients who live in rural and remote Australia to claim a Medicare benefit for mental health consultations via telehealth with eligible health practitioners.

Who will benefit from the Better Access Telehealth initiative?

Better Access Telehealth services are available to patients with a diagnosed mental disorder who would benefit from a structured approach to their treatment needs. People who might otherwise have not been able to take up mental health therapy services because of where they live will have access to services from their home or other convenient location via telehealth.

This improved access will allow people in need of mental health therapy service, including those living in rural, remote and very remote areas, to receive prompt treatment, and reduce any potential inconvenience, time and expense of having to travel to larger regional centres or major cities for sessions with their treating health practitioner.

What services will be available?

Medicare benefits are available for up to 10 individual and 10 group mental health therapy services per calendar year (1 January – 31 December) to patients with a Mental Health Treatment Plan who are referred for mental health therapy services.

Relevant services can be delivered by eligible health practitioners, that is, psychologists, occupational therapists, social workers, GPs and PMPs that meet the relevant registration requirements under the MBS.

Does Medicare cover video consultations for groups?

Yes. Under the Better Access Telehealth initiative, video consultations are available for groups of four to ten patients. Group therapy MBS items under Better Access can also be claimed if four patients were due to attend and one patient is unable to attend. The usual requirements for a Better Access group session will apply. The treating health practitioner will need to determine whether a group consultation is suitable, safe, and clinically appropriate.

Can a person access group therapy services from their current Better Access provider via telehealth?

If a person with a diagnosed mental illness is accessing Better Access services with an eligible health practitioner, they may be able to substitute face to face consultations with their preferred provider through telehealth group therapy sessions where it is clinically appropriate and safe to do so, provided that:

- the patient resides in a telehealth eligible area (MMM 4-7 locations) and is located at least 15 kilometres by road from the eligible health practitioner; and
- the health practitioner meets the relevant MBS registration requirements.

How will potential patients become aware of clinicians offering video consultations?

New patients are encouraged to speak with their GP or PMP to discuss the potential availability and suitability of Better Access services via telehealth.

Patients who are currently receiving Better Access services are encouraged to speak with their GP and/or treating allied mental health professional to find out if video consultations are available through their current provider.

How many consultations are funded through the MBS?

Patients will be able to claim up to 10 individual items and 10 group items per calendar year. These can be accessed by videoconference and/or face-to-face by eligible patients. A patient's initial referral will allow up to six sessions. After six sessions, the patient will need to return to the referring practitioner for review and potential referral for further sessions.

Will more than 10 sessions be available via telehealth in exceptional circumstances?

Patients referred to Better Access are eligible for Medicare rebates for a maximum of 10 individual and 10 group allied mental health services each calendar year. There is nothing precluding patients from accessing more than 10 individual and 10 group allied mental health services in a calendar year, however, Medicare benefits are only available for a maximum of 10 individual and 10 group allied mental health services each calendar year.

What is Better Access?

The Better Access initiative is funded through the MBS and provides Medicare benefits to patients for selected mental health therapy services provided by eligible GPs and PMP, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists.

The Better Access initiative was introduced to address low treatment rates for high prevalence mental disorders such as depression and anxiety – particularly presentations of mild to moderate severity where short term evidence-based interventions are most useful. It aims to improve outcomes for people with a clinically-diagnosed mental disorder through evidence-based treatment.

More information is available via the [Better Access Initiative resource collection](#) on the Department of Health and Aged Care website.

How does the Better Access telehealth services differ from current Better Access arrangements?

The telehealth and standard face-to-face Better Access items are similar in that they provide MBS benefits for up to 10 individual and 10 group mental health therapy sessions in a calendar year to patients with an assessed mental disorder who are referred by:

- a GP managing the patient under a GP Mental Health Treatment Plan; or
- a psychiatrist or paediatrician.

The 10 individual services may consist of focussed psychological strategies, psychological therapy services (provided by a clinical psychologist), and/or focussed psychological strategies provided by an eligible health practitioner.

Providers such as GPs and PMPs who have met the mental health skills training and accreditation requirements as set out by Medicare, are eligible to deliver telehealth services under the Better Access.

Must a video link be provided or is telephone only consultation sufficient?

Videoconference services are the preferred approach for substituting a face-to-face consultation. However, providers will also be able to offer audio-only services via telephone if video is not available. There are separate items available for the audio-only services.

No specific equipment is required to provide Medicare-compliant telehealth services however practitioners must ensure that their chosen telecommunications solution meets their clinical requirements and satisfies privacy laws. More information is provided at the [technology and technical issues page](#) on the MBS online website.

Can Medicare telehealth benefits be paid if the session is conducted via online chat box/messaging?

For a Medicare benefit to be paid for a telehealth service, a visual and audio link must be established with the patient. Medicare benefits are not payable for email including online chat box/messaging as there is no visual and audio link.

For telehealth group therapy sessions, a Medicare benefit can only be paid for services provided by video conference and when all other requirements of the service have been met.

Will telehealth consultation be suitable for all patients requiring psychological counselling?

Better Access consultations via telehealth may not be appropriate for all patients, particularly if there is concern that a person is at risk of doing harm to themselves or others, or if the patient does not have access to reliable or affordable broadband and/or technology required for videoconferencing.

The Department of Health and Aged Care has funded the Australian Psychological Society (APS) to provide information, resources and operational advice to eligible health practitioners on:

- the initial assessment requirements to ensure the person and their presentation is suitable to be a recipient of Better Access telehealth services
- risk management procedures for managing patients at risk of self-harm or harm to others when delivering services via videoconferencing
- the principles for choosing high quality, safe technology to deliver Better Access telehealth services.

In addition, each of the relevant professional associations has undertaken to promote and explain the Better Access telehealth initiative to their members and contribute to any directories identifying appropriately skilled health practitioners.

Where can I find more information?

The Australian Government will continue to provide updated information on the [Department of Health and Aged Care](#) website.

GPs and PMPs who are interested in learning more about becoming an eligible provider of Focused Psychological Strategies can visit the [General Practice Mental Health Standards Collaboration website](#).

Useful information may also be available through the following professional association websites:

Australian Psychological Society

www.psychology.org.au/

<http://www.believeinchange.com/Home/Become-the-Change/Find-A-Psychologist>

Occupational Therapy Australia

<https://www.otaus.com.au/>

<https://www.otaus.com.au/find-an-occupational-therapist>

Australian Association of Social workers

<https://www.aasw.asn.au>

<https://www.aasw.asn.au/find-a-social-worker/search/>

Royal Australian College of General Practice

<https://www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/mh/>

<https://www.racgp.org.au/education/gps/gpmhsc>

Does Medicare cover short-term telehealth sessions for patients who briefly travel overseas?

No. Medicare does not cover services provided or received outside of Australia.

Are there any changes to Medicare payment claiming processes that apply to telehealth services through Better Access?

No. There are no changes to the Medicare payment claiming processes. More information for Health professionals, including Medicare payment claiming forms and processes, is available through the [Services Australia](#) website.

Can the Telehealth for rural and remote patients be accessed by young people 12 - 25 years old?

Yes. Patient age restrictions do not apply to accessing telehealth MBS services. However, Better Access telehealth services can only be provided to a patient that is:

- is a non-admitted patient
- is eligible for Medicare benefits

A patient's treating health practitioner would need to determine whether a Better Access telehealth service is suitable, safe, and clinically appropriate for all patients, regardless of their age.