



Strengthening primary care – Extending telehealth

The Australian Government is investing an additional \$204.6 million to support continued access to universal telehealth for all Australians, building on previous investment of \$3.6 billion since March 2020. Telehealth will continue to benefit millions of Australians through the pandemic and has supported continuity of care in a COVID safe way.

Medical Benefits Schedule (MBS) items will be extended until 31 December 2021 for the following types of services:

- specialist
- general practitioner (GP)
- nursing
- midwifery
- allied health, and
- allied mental health attendances.

Changes will also be made to exempt certain patient cohorts from the previously required pre-existing relationship with a doctor to access telehealth for certain consultations, including

- smoking cessation consultations
- section 100 PBS prescriptions
- sexual and reproductive health consultations
- pregnancy counselling, and
- drug and alcohol counselling.

These changes will improve patient access to these services, regardless of where they live.

This is the next step in transitioning telehealth to become a permanent fixture of the post-COVID modernised health care system. It will complement the voluntary patient registration (VPR) initiative, to be known as MyGP, which will support continuity of care, including greater flexibility to patient care delivery, to improve health outcomes.

Why is this important?

Telehealth has been critical during the COVID-19 pandemic response, particularly for parts of the country that experienced lockdowns.

Between 13 March 2020 and 6 May 2021, over 57.5 million COVID-19 MBS telehealth services have been delivered to 13.7 million patients, with \$2.9 billion in Medicare benefits paid. More than 83,800 providers have used telehealth services. Since March 2020, more than 300 temporary MBS telehealth items have been implemented.

The extension of telehealth services is consistent with the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, and ensures people will have continued access to essential health services.

The extension to telehealth services also complements the Government's commitment to ongoing primary care reform.

Who will benefit?

All Australians will benefit from support to access health services through telehealth, whether through videoconferencing or over the telephone. Those people in populations that are more vulnerable to COVID-19 and those subject to movement restrictions due to public health orders, including quarantine, will particularly benefit.

Clinicians can have confidence that they can continue to support patients using telehealth where it is safe and clinically appropriate.

How much will this cost?

The Australian Government is investing \$204.6 million for the extension of telehealth from 1 April 2021 to 31 December 2021.