



COVID-19 and virtual communication

What you need to know – 23 December 2020

Who should read this document?

Carers and family members communicating virtually (by phone or electronic device) with a healthcare worker about a person they care for.

What is this document about?

This document is developed for carers and family members who may need to have a difficult conversation with a healthcare worker. This may be over the phone or virtually by computer, laptop, tablet or a smart phone. It includes lessons learnt from consumers, families and healthcare workers during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Reasons for virtual meetings

A phone call or a virtual meeting with a healthcare worker can keep you updated about the person you care for. Ask your healthcare worker if they provide this service, and if so, what virtual options are available. If you're not comfortable with virtual meetings, it's okay to ask if there's another way and how the healthcare worker can help you find a way that works for you.

Meetings over the phone or virtually with your healthcare worker are not the same as being in the room with your doctor or nurse but virtual meetings can have other benefits, including:

- **Keeping everyone safe when meeting face-to-face is not possible**
Virtual meetings can help protect you, the person you care for and staff from risk of infection during difficult times such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Where available, this type of meeting can be with doctors, nurses, midwives, allied health and mental health staff. It is a safe and secure option.
- **Protecting privacy and confidentiality for patients and families**
You and the person you care for have the right to privacy and confidentiality. Video meetings should use a secure platform that protects your private information. Video and telephone conversations should offer the same privacy and security standards as what you would receive in person.
- **Reducing travel time, waiting around and costs**
Virtual meetings allow you to see or talk to the healthcare worker or the person you care for while you are at home or unable to be with them in person. This reduces the time and cost needed for travelling and gives better access to anyone who lives rurally or regionally, or has difficulty using public and other transport options.
- **Connecting with the person you care for**
Reliable and regular communication with the person you care for and their healthcare team is most important during difficult times. Virtual meetings, especially those that use video, mean that you can see and connect with them. This kind of meeting also makes it more possible for other family or friends to be involved, especially if face-to-face meetings are hard because of distance or other commitments. These meetings can also help you to talk with the healthcare team to plan for ongoing treatment and care.
- **Improving access to healthcare workers**
Virtual meetings can offer a flexible way for you to have unplanned or urgent meetings with the healthcare team. This can be important when the person you care for has sudden changes in their health or decisions need to be made quickly.

Preparing for a virtual meeting

Summary checklist:

- Connect early and test the connection works
- Have details of any medications
- Have a list of questions prepared
- Have pen and paper ready to make notes
- Repeat back your understanding of what has been said
- At the end of the meeting take a moment to check your questions have been answered
- Agree next steps at the end of the meeting
- Tell the healthcare provider if you need any support or assistance

Check you have the right equipment for your virtual meeting

- For video calling, you will need a phone, computer or tablet with a camera. Check that you have a good internet connection.
- **TIP!** If you can watch YouTube clips without any disruption, your connection is good enough for a video meeting.
- For an unplanned meeting, remember it is okay to ask for another time. Important information can be lost if you are in a place that is not ideal, such as a supermarket
- It is also okay to ask for a break, or to reschedule the meeting if you receive bad or unexpected news. You may need time to absorb the news and figure out the questions that are important to you
- For a planned virtual meeting, you need to think about the strength and reliability of your internet connection. You can ask others in your house to stop using the internet for things that might slow your connection, such as video streaming or gaming
- Have relevant information with you such as health records, prescriptions, list of medications, copies of results or advanced care plans
- Prepare a list of concerns you want to discuss and bring pen and paper
- Where possible, set up in a quiet, private and well-lit room (for video calls). If it is a video call, try to avoid having bright light behind you – for example, face the window rather than having your back to the window. This helps to make sure your face can be seen clearly when using video
- It may help to have someone you trust to sit with you before, during and after your meeting for support. A support person can be helpful if you receive difficult results or news, or there is a lot of information to take in
- Connect your device to the internet. Sit close to the camera so your head and shoulders are in view. If there is someone with you, check that both of you can be seen.¹

Connecting virtually

- Wait until your computer connects you to your meeting. Look directly at the screen. When you see your healthcare worker, speak clearly and slowly to help your healthcare worker understand you
- Introduce yourself and any support (person) you have beside you for the meeting. Pause after speaking and take turns to speak with the healthcare worker. If you need to move out of camera view, let your healthcare worker know what you are doing
- If you need an interpreter, they can join the appointment – this is something the healthcare provider can help organise
- If you have a communication disability (vision, hearing or cognitive) it is okay and important to either ask or let the healthcare worker know how they can support you

¹https://coh.centre.uq.edu.au/files/2022/COH_UQ_Consumer_Attending%20a%20videoconsultation_v1.pdf

- **TIP!** For a planned meeting, ask how you can practice connecting before the virtual meeting. A few minutes before your appointment time, follow the connection instructions given to you when you made the appointment. Your healthcare worker should provide you an internet link to access and start your meeting.

Speak clearly. Use plain words. Look to show you understand.

Some words/phrases that may help when talking to a healthcare worker by phone/video:

- It is not okay for me to talk right now – I need to be in a quieter place. When can I call you back?
 - I have a support person with me, so I need to put you on speaker phone. Their name is [name] and I may need them to ask questions and write things down for me
 - What is the best way for me to let you know I have a question?
 - I am feeling a bit rushed, but it is important I understand what you are saying. Can you please slow down a bit?
 - I do not understand what you mean – can you please explain it again in different words?
 - I am feeling upset and I need more time to take this in. Is there another time soon that we can talk again?
- During your meeting check your understanding with your healthcare worker at any time. They often have helpful ways to make sure you understand what your meeting is about²
 - It is okay to ask your healthcare worker to break information into smaller pieces of information. This way you can ask them to clarify something they have said or ask that they explain one part of a diagnosis or treatment plan before they start the next topic.³ It is important you pay attention to your emotional wellbeing. Uncertainty, fear, grief, and mistrust make difficult conversations hard⁴ during times, such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic⁵
 - Write down any advice or instructions, and make sure you understand the next steps. This may be a good role for a support person, as it can be difficult for one person to listen, take in new information and ask questions all at the same time
 - Repeat the instructions back to the healthcare worker to show that you understand. Check in with your support person to see if you may have missed information or have questions that need answers⁶
 - If you get cut off and cannot reconnect straight away, wait for a phone call from the healthcare worker and do not be afraid to call back.

Finishing your meeting and next steps

- Do not rush to finish your meeting. Ask your healthcare worker to repeat the main topics discussed in your meeting. Let your healthcare worker know that you have discussed all your concerns and that you have all the information you need
- Ask your healthcare worker to tell you what will happen after your meeting and who is responsible for what will happen next, and check if there is anything you need to do straight away
- Ask whether there is a need for a follow up appointment, how that will be arranged and if you can expect to get anything in writing either by email or in the post. Check that they have the correct address for you
- Disconnect from the meeting once the meeting has ended.

²<https://www.ceh.org.au/resource-hub/health-literacy-using-the-teach-back-technique/>

³Table 1, Tips for Enhancing Virtual Connections, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7371327/>

⁴<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/covid-19/communities-of-practice/Pages/guide-talking-to-relatives.aspx/>

⁵<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7371327/>

⁶<https://health.gov/healthliteracyonline/>

Virtual meeting examples

Virtual meetings have the same benefit as in-person care when used correctly. In some cases, virtual meetings improve patient outcomes.⁷ The following are some examples:

Creating a close and safe environment for elderly patients

- Aged care facilities use virtual meetings to help elderly patients, family members and healthcare workers to create a more connected and safer environment for their at-home older patients who may have difficulty leaving their home.⁸

Improving connection in emergency medicine

- Many healthcare workers feel that they are unable to build a relationship or trust with a patient when they are wearing full personal protective equipment which can cover their whole face and body. Some emergency medicine doctors have used video calls to connect with patients with coronavirus (COVID-19) so that their whole face can be seen by the patient. Meeting virtually with patients has helped these healthcare workers to overcome the difficulty of connecting and supporting patients at a time when they need it most.⁹

Useful links

[Managing communication](#) with your healthcare worker

[Questions prompt sheet](#) lists common health and advanced disease questions for carers

[Clinicians companion reference guide to meaningful discussions with patients and families](#)

[Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health](#)

[Health Translations](#) access to multilingual resources published by government departments, peak health bodies, hospitals, and community health and welfare organisations.

[Hospital In The Home](#)

[How to access health services online for patients](#)

[Health Literacy Services. What is telehealth?](#)

[Strategies to address common barriers to successful conversations over telephone or video](#)

Information about protecting yourself against coronavirus (COVID-19)

During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (the department) will regularly update its guidance as new evidence becomes available. For general information about coronavirus (COVID-19) visit: [dhhs.vic.gov.au/health-services-and-general-practitioners-coronavirus-disease-covid-19](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/health-services-and-general-practitioners-coronavirus-disease-covid-19).

To find out more information about coronavirus and how to stay safe visit

[DHHS.vic – coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus)

[<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus)

If you need an interpreter, call TIS National on 131 450

⁷<https://chironhealth.com/definitive-guide-to-telemedicine/telemedicine-info-patients/getting-comfortable-video-visits/>

⁸<https://zoom.us/docs/doc/Video%20Communications%20in%20Healthcare.pdf>

⁹ Minor LB. Dean of Stanford Medicine: how virtual care can make medicine even more human. Fortune 2020 April 9 <https://fortune.com/2020/04/09/virtual-health-care-telehealth-coronavirus/>

For information in other languages, scan the QR code or visit [DHHS.vic –Translated resources - coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/translated-resources-coronavirus-disease-covid-19)
<<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/translated-resources-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>>



For any questions
Coronavirus hotline 1800 675 398 (24 hours)
Please keep Triple Zero (000) for emergencies only

To receive this document in another format phone 1300 651 160 using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or [email Project Management Office Communications](mailto:COVID-19PMO-Communications@dhhs.vic.gov.au) <COVID-19PMO-Communications@dhhs.vic.gov.au>.

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Available at: [DHHS.vic – coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus) <<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>>