

Factsheet 37

Updated on 19 March 2021

Remote Consultations Part 2: Maximising Opportunities

This factsheet has been designed for use by healthcare professionals only.

We know that many healthcare professionals have been delivering consultations remotely over the last year, and while our understanding of technology is increasing all the time, there are still challenges associated with virtual consultations. You have probably encountered some or all of the following:

- Limitations of technology, such as poor internet connection
- Increased distractions, e.g. children at home, phones ringing in the background, notifications popping up on screen as you are talking
- Patients failing to answer phone or video calls, and therefore missing appointments
- Difficulty in demonstrating practical skills, such as inhaler techniques
- Difficulty in gauging the patient's wellbeing – an 'I'm fine' response is often betrayed by body language – or understanding
- Delayed provision of physical resources, e.g. handouts, sample containers

However, these challenges are not insurmountable. Many of them can be addressed by carefully **managing the consultation environment** and treating it as you would a face-to-face appointment.

- Ensure you have a suitable space in which to conduct the consultations. If you are in the surgery, take the same measures as you usually would: close the door and post the 'clinic in progress sign' to minimise interruptions. If working remotely (e.g. to carry out telephone discussions) make sure you have a quiet room in which confidentiality can be maintained – the patient should feel as at ease as if you were in the same room.
- If you are using an online platform (e.g. Teams, Zoom) ensure you are comfortable with the technology before starting your first appointment. It can be useful to have a troubleshooting guide to hand in case anything goes wrong, and so you can offer support to the patient if they are struggling.
- Be prepared to signpost patients to resources that may help them achieve improved self-management. If you have been unable to demonstrate a technique or would usually use physical resources such as placebo devices to explain things, are there videos or PDF leaflets you can send to boost understanding? **This is particularly important for telephone consultations.**
- Keep to time as you would in a face-to-face clinic. It can be easy to forget that patients are waiting when they are not visible in the waiting room, and patients may be more inclined to chat when they are at home, so be clear about the time that is available. Are you able to longer slightly longer appointments virtually? This may be useful if you cannot see the patient and need a little more time to draw out information.
- Encourage patients to take the same steps to prioritise their consultation. Ensure they are aware of the specific appointment so they can clear their work calendar or ensure they have childcare (human or electronic!), and encourage reception staff to emphasise the importance of minimising potential distractions when arranging the appointment.

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Do remote consultations present opportunities?

The short answer is yes! Conducting routine reviews and appointments remotely offers greater flexibility for patients and professionals. Education for Health learners have reported success stories within their own practice, such as arranging COPD reviews with patients who had previously been unable to attend clinics due to site-based work commitments, and there is evidence that localities have successfully used technology to improve efficiency by using online consultations when triaging minor ailments¹ and by introducing pre-consultation online forms².

Remote consultations also offer peace of mind for individuals with health anxiety, both related to Covid-19 and more generally, as avoidance of primary care settings may previously have impacted their engagement with healthcare services. There is evidence to indicate that practices who were able to respond quickly to the pandemic by introducing or extending online facilities experienced decreases in consultation rates that were significantly lower than the national average³, further demonstrating the role of remote consultation in sustaining patient engagement.

Minimising risk

It is of course important to ensure that local policies and procedures are updated to support digital innovation, and Dr Kathryn Leask highlights the value of using clinical templates for history-taking and multisystem checks to minimise the risk of missed diagnoses⁴. It is also important that all practitioners understand that a remote consultation may not always be sufficient, and a face-to-face appointment may be required; this is particularly relevant when a patient reports a new condition, requires a physical examination, or when a red flag is identified.

NHS England (2020) has produced a comprehensive [toolkit](#) for primary care settings looking to introduce or improve their remote consultation offer. This document further explores challenges and how to overcome them and offers case studies and practical tips for implementing a range of digital models.

Training is also available from Education for Health around maximising the impact and efficiency of remote consultations. Please contact our [Partnerships Team](#) if you would like more information about arranging local training.

References:

¹ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/e-consult.pdf>

² <https://www.networks.nhs.uk/nhs-networks/releasing-capacity-in-general-practice/messageboard/documents/2-2-e-consultations-online-pre-consultation-questionnaires-haughton-thornley-medical-centres>

³ <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/charts-and-infographics/how-has-covid-19-affected-service-delivery-in-gp-practices>

⁴ <https://www.gponline.com/getting-remote-consultations/article/1705559>