



Virtual-First Mindset Offers Healthcare Unlimited Possibilities

Adding virtual interactions into healthcare will fundamentally improve patients' experiences and increase provider satisfaction.

The COVID-19 pandemic has driven a rapid adoption of virtual technologies for many different purposes. Customers now have access to a wide range of services from the comfort, safety, and convenience of their own homes – including for healthcare purposes.

While the rapid move to virtual became necessary to accommodate social distancing and help reduce the spread of COVID-19, benefits have emerged for those on both sides of the healthcare equation. Now the question is how healthcare organizations and patients can further leverage these technologies for even greater benefits.

Healthcare providers and patients have grown accustomed to virtual engagements. This is helping to redefine appointments, access, and capacity.

Moving Toward a Virtual-First Future

The in-person-only model will improve with the addition of virtual care.

Even before the pandemic, the healthcare system experienced access issues, physician and nursing shortages, and challenges to the quality and cost of providing care equitably. The delta between the demand for healthcare and the ability of the healthcare system to provide it through the traditional office structure was growing farther apart each year. For some patients, this dynamic made it difficult to reach healthcare professionals during key moments in their treatments. Virtual technologies have the potential to help the industry rethink the definition of access entirely.

The idea of virtual first is not to replace true in-person care needs, but to reimagine the approach to achieving better healthcare by leveraging virtual technologies whenever appropriate. This idea encourages medical professionals and patients to consider virtual first, as appropriate, before assuming the need for an in-person appointment. Often this may lead to a hybrid approach where initial care is through an appropriate virtual modality, followed by in-person care as needed.

The immediate benefits of a virtual-first approach.

Follow-up appointments, maintenance check-ins for chronic illnesses, discussing test results, and other appointments that do not require an in-person physical interaction can easily be moved to a virtual setting. Instead of meeting in person, healthcare teams can virtually engage

with patients who do not require in-person care, collaborate among healthcare team members, and provide better longitudinal care.

By meeting virtually, patients avoid potentially lengthy trips to their healthcare providers, saving them time away from work or life commitments, along with reducing exposure to others. The healthcare team can support an increased number of patient engagements and reduce people coming to the office, allowing for more dedicated time to those in need of in-person care.

Moving toward value-based, holistic care.

A virtual-first approach has the benefit of decreasing costs associated with supporting an in-person-only model, and it will enable the delivery of more cost-effective, equitable care. The move to virtual-first approaches encourages the use of wearable devices and other advancements to gather ongoing patient data to support a more holistic relationship between patients and providers. This information will create greater patient engagement and help clinicians more easily track patient health so that action is taken to promote better care results.

Many healthcare needs will be best supported using a hybrid approach of virtual and in-person. A virtual-first solution supports more frequent and collaborative engagements, not more time. The model values the patient's time as much as the time of the healthcare staff. The virtual-first approach will result in rethinking the role of physical office space and staffing to address what will be a rapidly changing environment.

Moving Beyond the Status Quo...



For decades, the healthcare system has relied on in-office, in-person visits for medical care. Although there will always be a need to receive certain medical services in person, the pandemic has accelerated a move to a person-centric, virtual-first model for healthcare and health support.



The Opportunities of Virtual First

The pandemic shows the potential of virtual healthcare to improve patient care.

In prior use, virtual health was sometimes approached as a siloed offering. This was largely due to entrenched healthcare policies and financial models established well before virtual technologies offered a hybrid of in-person and virtual care. Patients were accustomed to seeing providers in person for care, and practitioners were accustomed to providing it.

Advancements in communications technology, the growing acceptance of virtual interactions, and pandemic-related concerns from seeking

physical care have changed this expectation. Patients will happily receive virtual care through varying modalities if they receive the assistance they need. Their needs (and the clinical team's needs) may be met by live video conference, artificial intelligence chatbot, asynchronous video, secure chat, text, secure messaging, mobile applications, and home monitoring using simple and complex tools based upon the need.

The goal should be to maximize virtual medical support that provides the best care and value for the patient, as opposed to simply reverting to the old standard as the post-pandemic world approaches.

All Stakeholders Benefit from Virtual First



Patients

- Convenient and easily available
- No unnecessary visits
- Better access to medical professionals
- More affordable
- Efficient appointments and faster response times
- Reduced exposure to sick patients



Providers

- Improved safety
- Easier access to patients for ongoing monitoring
- Better patient retention
- Decreased burnout



Payers

- Lower costs for offices and staff
- Lower cost per outcome
- Increased patient satisfaction
- Supports value-based care

How To Think Virtual First

Federal health agencies – both those that directly provide healthcare to patients and those that administer benefits – should examine current offerings and new programs through the lens of virtual first.

To start thinking about virtual first, healthcare providers and federal program leaders should:

-  **Reimagine** virtual as the first step for a current or emerging problem.
-  **Ensure** that available technologies are ready to support the outcome.
-  **Mainstream and expand** access with virtual care.
-  **Reexamine** facility and staffing needs.
-  **Use** data and artificial intelligence to solve previously unsolvable problems.
-  **Transform** access using a person-focused lens.

The path to achieve virtual first is here. We have an opportunity to reimagine how patients receive care, reevaluate what physical facilities are needed, and rethink staffing, including where staff are located and when they work based upon new processes. A virtual-first system can dramatically reduce the reliance on physical space, reduce the number of in-office appointments, and lower the number of employee hours needed to deliver care while offering patients better experiences and outcomes.

As a global technology leader, Accenture can help you on this journey. Many of our healthcare clients already have started this process and are seeing significant results, including increased patient access, provider flexibility, and most notably, reduction in some provider burden while caring for patients.

Prepare your organization to realize the possibilities of this new paradigm for medical care. Virtual first is more than a small change in practice—it is a fundamental mindset shift.

For More Information

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