

The College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) provides advice to Albertans to support improved patient care and safety. This advice does not define a standard of practice, nor should it be interpreted as legal advice.

Patient FAQs are dynamic and may be edited or updated for clarity at any time. Please refer back to these articles regularly to ensure you are aware of the most recent advice.

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## What is virtual care?

Virtual care is patient care provided remotely by a doctor using communications technologies such as telephone, email, apps, videoconference, and so on. Virtual care can also refer to the use of these technologies to share health information.

Virtual care can provide patients with access to doctors (including specialists) who practise in other parts of the province, across Canada and in other countries. It can save patients time and money by

allowing them to connect with their doctor from their own home or other convenient location rather than travelling to appointments.

### **Can I use an app on my phone (e.g., Skype, Facetime, WhatsApp) to make video calls to my doctor?**

Your doctor must keep your health information private and secure, and may ask you to use a specific app or other technology to ensure you are protected.

### **Can I sign a waiver so my doctor doesn't have to be concerned about my privacy?**

No, your doctor is required to protect your health information under Alberta's [Health Information Act](#).

### **Does it matter where I am during a virtual care appointment?**

Yes. You should be in a quiet, private space and use a secure connection (e.g., landline or password-protected WiFi) to help keep your information confidential. Don't use a public "hotspot" in a shopping mall or coffee shop, as these are not secure.

If your appointment will be by videoconference, check in advance that your Internet connection is fast enough to support a good experience.

### **Is virtual care a good option for my care?**

Patients can receive excellent care by virtual care, but it's not appropriate for every patient or every situation. It depends on your medical concern, if a physical exam is necessary, and if you have good access to other local resources you might need, such as laboratory testing and diagnostic imaging.

Your doctor can help you determine if virtual care is a good option for you.

## **Can I expect the same quality of care through virtual care as in-person?**

Yes. The doctor will ask you about your health concerns, take a relevant history, conduct an appropriate examination, request diagnostic tests if indicated, refer you for consultation as necessary, give you their diagnosis, explain the benefits and risks of treatment options, obtain your informed consent and ensure appropriate follow-up.

If a prescription is part of your treatment plan, it's vitally important you tell the doctor about any allergies and other medications or substances you may be taking; your safety depends on it.

The doctor should also advise you what to do in an emergency situation or if you need medical attention between appointments.

## **I'd like to use a web-based health service. How do I know if it's reputable?**

Web-based health services can be a convenient and easy way to access medical advice, but it's important to know where the doctor is licensed and whether they have the right training and experience to provide safe, effective care. Be aware that other countries might not have the same clinical standards or privacy requirements as Canada.

All doctors who participate in the online service should be listed on the website, along with information about their experience and training. It's also a good idea to check the website of the medical regulator in their home jurisdiction for details about the doctors' credentials and discipline history. You can usually find out where the service is located by looking at the contact information on the website.

To look up Canadian doctors, go to the appropriate provincial or territorial medical regulator listed [here](#).

## **Is there a cost for virtual care?**

There is no cost to Alberta patients for any services provided through publically-funded healthcare programs, whether delivered by virtual care or in person. However, physicians may charge a fee for uninsured services. Under our [Charging for Uninsured Professional](#)

[Services](#) standard of practice, physicians must inform their patients about any fees before providing the service.

Private online doctor services and apps often do charge patients directly, either on a pay-per-visit basis or through a monthly fee. Pricing information should be posted on the website or app. Private health insurance may help pay these costs for patients with coverage.

If you're unclear about fees or insurance coverage, ask for more information before providing your payment information or using the service.

## **Should I tell my local doctor that I'm also receiving care from a doctor by virtual care?**

Patients have the best outcomes when their care is coordinated, so it's a good idea to tell your local doctor if you're receiving care or advice from any other doctor, regardless of format or location. It's likely the doctor providing virtual care will ask you the name of your local doctor to keep them informed about your care. You can also ask for a summary of your care and provide it to your local doctor yourself. That way, your doctors will better understand your medical needs and coordinate their care for you.

## **How do I find out what will happen with my personal health information?**

If you're using an online service or app, take the time to read and understand the privacy policy. Typically, you will be asked if you agree to the terms and conditions of the policy when you sign up. The best privacy policies are written in plain language. If it's too technical and difficult to understand, you might want to reconsider using the service.

Your doctor should also tell you if your information will be shared with any other healthcare professionals or used for any purposes other than your care.

## **What should I do if I have concerns about the care I'm receiving?**

Contact the CPSA at 1-800-661-4689 and ask to speak with a [Complaints Navigator](#). If the care was provided by a doctor who is not licensed in Alberta, we can help direct you to the appropriate regulatory body.

### **I have more questions. Who can I talk to?**

Our Member Service Agents are always here to answer questions. They may be reached at 1-800-561-3899 (toll free in Canada) or [publicinquiries@cpsa.ab.ca](mailto:publicinquiries@cpsa.ab.ca).

For more information about the [Standards of Practice](#), contact Chantelle Dick, Standards of Practice Coordinator at [chantelle.dick@cpsa.ab.ca](mailto:chantelle.dick@cpsa.ab.ca).