

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 communication technologies like telephone, email, apps, videoconference, and so on.

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 enabling 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?

Not all apps have the appropriate security needed to keep your health information private and secure. Your doctor may ask you to use a specific app or other technology to ensure you are protected, but will consider what is easily available to you.

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 Wi-Fi) to help keep your information confidential. Don't use a public "hotspot" in places like 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.

If you are outside Canada, your doctor may not be able to provide you with virtual care, as they may not have the licensing or liability protection to do so. Speak to your doctor if you have questions.

Is virtual care a good option for my care?

Patients can receive excellent care through virtual appointments, 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 access to other local resources you might need, like laboratory testing or diagnostic imaging.

Doctors are not obligated to provide virtual care and may require you to attend your appointment in person. What's best for the patient drives the decision for whether to use virtual care.

If the doctor thinks you need to be seen in person, they will make arrangements to see you in the clinic or with an appropriate healthcare provider as close to you as possible.

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, doctors may charge a fee for uninsured services. Under our [Charging for Uninsured Professional Services](#) standard of practice, doctors 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.

Will the quality of care through virtual care be the same as I receive 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 (e.g., vitamins, herbal supplements, over-the-counter medications, etc.); 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.

How do I prepare for my virtual care appointment?

You can ask the doctor's office how to send any items that will make the visit more efficient, such as symptom questionnaires or photos related to the medical problem. Complete and submit any required forms to give your consent for the use of virtual visits, including video appointments and text messaging.¹

Are there resources to help me join the call? What if something goes wrong?

Your doctor should provide you with instructions on what to do if anything goes wrong during the virtual care appointment. If they don't, ask what you should do if you get disconnected.

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.

Physicians providing virtual care to Albertans must be licensed with CPSA unless:

- the medical care is not readily available in Alberta (e.g., specialty care);
- the care is being provided to ensure follow-up or continuity of care to a patient who has relocated to Alberta, until the patient finds a local primary care provider; or
- the virtual care encounter is for emergency assessment or treatment of the patient where there are no other care options available.

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 service's website, along with information about their experience and training. It's also a good idea to check the website of the medical regulator in the doctor's home jurisdiction for details about the doctor's 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](#).

Should I tell my family 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 primary 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 primary doctor to keep them informed about your care. You can also ask for a summary of your care and provide it to your primary 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 virtual care I'm receiving?

Anyone with concerns about the care provided by an Alberta physician can file a [complaint](#). 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 questions about virtual care. Who can I talk to?

Anyone who wants to know more about virtual care can review our [standard of practice](#), outlining our expectations of physicians providing this care, or our [advice document](#) for Albertans on virtual care.

For more information, contact Chantelle Dick, Standards of Practice Advisor at standardsofpractice@cpsa.ab.ca.

ⁱ From the Canadian Medical Association's [How to Navigate a Virtual Care Visit: Patient Guide](#) (June 2020)