

Life + Money

Are You Ready to Visit Your Doctor Online? Telemedicine Has Arrived

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Dallas marketing executive Susan Thompson knew exactly where her cold was headed when she began feeling under the weather one day a few years ago. Her symptoms follow a pattern, often leading to a chest infection that requires antibiotics to clear up. "After living in this body for 74 years, I know what I'm getting," Thompson says.

Instead of waiting a few days to get an appointment with her doctor to confirm her diagnosis, Thompson called Teladoc, a telemedicine service offered by her employer. Within 10 minutes she had a doctor on the line, and by the end of the day she had a prescription for the infection.

She's used the service three times since, always with the same results.

Thompson is part of a growing trend toward telemedicine, which uses technology to connect doctors and patients via apps, phones and videoconferencing. Telemedicine revenue is expected to grow around 40 percent a year over the next five years, from its current \$645 million to more than \$3.5 billion in 2020, according to a report by IBISWorld.

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▶ Telemedicine has been rapidly changing the way health care is delivered in the United States, giving doctors the ability to communicate with their patients through text and video messages from thousands of miles away in the event that an in-person consultation is either unnecessary or unattainable.

"At this point it feels like health care is lagging daily life, with the advent of smartphones and the Internet," says Shana Alex Charles, an assistant professor in the Health Services Department at California State University, Fullerton. "Why do we still need to go to a doctor's office and sit in a waiting room for something that can be done, especially something like daily monitoring, better and faster online?"

When it comes to serving consumers, the industry is growing in two distinct areas: non-urgent diagnosis and treatment of minor ailments like strep throat or an ear infection, and ongoing monitoring of high-risk patients or those recently released from the hospital.

In the first instance, a person experiencing flu-like symptoms would log on to an app or Web portal directly administered by a health system, an insurer or their employer and video conference with a doctor who would assess the patient and write a prescription, all from potentially hundreds of miles away. Some pharmacies have installed self-service kiosks that patients can use to video conference with a doctor who could potentially call in a prescription while the consumer is still in the store.

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In the second scenario, a patient might go home with Internet-connected devices that would monitor their blood pressure, temperature and other vitals and remotely send reports to a doctor or hospital who would analyze the results for any potential problems.

