

UnitedHealth Group

Telehealth & Diabetes

Fact Sheet



UnitedHealth Group®

The Epidemic

- Nearly 24 million people in the U.S. had diabetes in 2007, 24 percent of whom were undiagnosed, according to the American Diabetes Association (ADA). Another estimated 57 million, or 26 percent of the adult population, are considered pre-diabetic.
- The prevalence of the potentially devastating disease has been climbing sharply in recent years, partly due to changes in diet and lifestyle – things that can be controlled.
- Progression to diabetes among those with pre-diabetes is not inevitable. Research conducted through the Diabetes Prevention Program, a landmark clinical research study, shows that a typical pre-diabetic person who reduces body weight by 7 percent by adopting better eating habits or walking 150 minutes per week reduces the risk of becoming diabetic by 58 percent, which means catching it early is key to successfully reducing the toll of diabetes.

How Telehealth Can Help Diabetics Take Control of Their Health

- Diabetics need to make frequent trips to the doctor and telehealth provides patients with easier access to both physicians and specialists, particularly for diabetics who live in rural areas or who find it's not convenient to make regular trips to the doctor.
- Doctors recommend that individuals with diabetes regularly check their blood sugar levels both through self-monitoring equipment as well as by getting regular lab tests. At telehealth clinics, diabetics can receive glucose tests without having to travel to the doctor's office, including the HbA1c test, which measures average glucose levels over a prolonged period of time and is a key way to monitor diabetes control.
- Through telehealth, individuals with diabetes can be connected to nurse practitioners who can help with diabetes education and to nutritionists who can help diabetics develop a healthy meal plan, which is an important component of diabetes control.
- Individuals with diabetes also can easily be connected to specialists using telehealth technology. Individuals with diabetes must be regularly monitored for complications associated with diabetes, such as eye disease, heart disease, kidney disease and nerve damage. For example, diabetics should get regular eye exams, including a dilated retinal exam, to monitor any changes in vision or the health of the eye because of the risk of eye disease among diabetics. Diabetics are also advised to regularly see a podiatrist as they are at increased risk of a small cut or blister developing into a dangerous infection.

Screening Capabilities of Telehealth Clinics

- Both mobile and on-site telehealth clinics can be equipped with blood glucose testing equipment, allowing patients to get screened for diabetes and pre-diabetes in a convenient location.

- They also can be equipped with more sophisticated technology and tools to check for eye disease, kidney problems, and nerve damage, which are complications commonly associated with diabetes, and other preventive and chronic disease management tests recommended by evidence-based guidelines for diabetes care.
- The clinics may also be equipped with ultrasound testing for vascular disease or complicated pregnancies in diabetics and other cutting-edge, non-invasive medical technologies as they become approved by the FDA, clinical experts and practice guidelines.
- By expanding access to care, telehealth clinics can help catch more cases of pre-diabetes and diabetes, and education can begin to teach pre-diabetic patients how to reduce their risk of developing the disease and provide diabetics with recommended guidelines to help them manage the disease and reduce their risk of complications.

The Toll of Diabetes

- Properly managing diabetes can help reduce the risk of serious, sometimes life-threatening complications; however far too many people are not aware that they have diabetes until they develop one of its complications.
- The risk for death among people with diabetes is about twice that of people without diabetes of similar age, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
 - Adults with diabetes have heart disease death rates about 2 to 4 times higher than adults without diabetes.
 - The risk for stroke among diabetics is 2 to 4 times higher and the risk of death from stroke is 2.8 times higher than among non-diabetics.
 - Diabetes is the leading cause of new cases of blindness among adults aged 20-74 and is the leading cause of kidney failure.