Telehealth Could Improve Retention in Care for People With HIV

This finding is particularly relevant given the COVID-19 pandemic's myriad disruptions to health care services and everyday life.

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Expanding the use of telehealth among people with HIV could help keep them engaged in the routine medical care that is vital to protect their long-term health, a group of researchers has argued, AJMC reports. This finding is particularly relevant to the current moment, as the health care system rapidly adjusts to the ever-changing new reality wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As described in a poster at the IDWeek conference in October, Dima Dandachi, MD, of the University of Missouri, and her colleagues conducted a survey of 371 people receiving HIV-related health care at a Houston clinic between February and June 2018. The survey sought to determine their attitudes about telehealth services.

Sixty-three percent of the participants were Black, and 83% were born in the United States. The majority acquired the virus through heterosexual sex. Thirty-six percent were women, and the median age was 51.

A total of 211 (57%) of the participants said they would be more likely to use telehealth than to attend in-person appointments if telehealth were offered. The most common reasons they cited for the telehealth preference were scheduling convenience (69% cited this), decreased travel time (63%) and privacy (62%).

A total of 137 (37%) of the participants said they would use telehealth frequently, perhaps exclusively, for their HIV care if this were an option.

Factors associated with a more favorable opinion of telehealth included being born in the United States, being a man who has sex with men, having a higher level of education and having a higher level of perceived HIV-related stigma.

Factors linked to a lower likelihood of using telehealth included living with HIV for more than 10 years, having difficulty with in-person visits and lacking the necessary technology.

After the participants tried telehealth, 52% retained their favorable opinion of the

modality—despite still needing to make in-person visits to pick up prescriptions or have blood drawn for lab tests.

“Telehealth programs for [people with HIV] can improve retention in care,” the study authors concluded. “A modification of the definition for retention in care, incorporating telehealth, should be considered.”

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