



Telemedicine

New advances in the technology of telecommunications have changed aspects of home health care for the elderly that benefit caregivers as well. Simply put, telemedicine is the use of telecommunications technology to diagnose illnesses, manage conditions and transmit medical information.

Telemedicine covers everything from a simple telephone call to a doctor to a virtual physical done by video conferencing. Since it facilitates contact between a health care worker and a patient without the patient having to travel, telemedicine is particularly useful for patients in remote areas and patients who are homebound, such as the elderly and disabled.

Research Databases

One of the more simple forms of telemedicine is the research database—which allows both patients and health care workers to research medical topics instantly and thoroughly. University archives, video archives, medical data and encyclopedias can now be accessed online. Where once you would have to spend days in the library to find information about treatment, an illness or a disease, now you can spend a few hours on the Internet researching treatment options, disease information and signs and symptoms of illnesses. The availability to average people of a vast array of knowledge is beginning to level the playing field—giving patients and caregivers an advantage in diagnosing and treating common and uncommon medical problems.

Video Consultations with Physicians and Nurses

You and your elder may be able to participate in one of the growing number of home health care firms

that make use of video consultations to stay in day-to-day, hour-by-hour contact with their clients through video technology. These services typically provide an array of technologies to their clients so that they can stay in touch: computers, videoconferencing supplies, Internet access and monitoring equipment. This can all be expensive, but advocates argue that it takes home health care to a new level and, ultimately, will allow a higher level of care. It also can ease some of the burden on caregivers, freeing them from constant monitoring and worry.

E-Mail

Increasingly, e-mail is a way for doctors and other health care workers to stay in touch with patients and their caregivers. E-mail is less intrusive than the telephone, and it can provide a way for patients to touch base

with their health care providers in an informal, relaxed setting.

Drawbacks

Although the advantages of telemedicine are many, there are two major drawbacks. The first is cost. Many of these monitoring and assessment systems require a high level of technical sophistication and a tremendous investment in technology. The second issue is safety. Nothing can substitute for a real-life, physical exam by a doctor who is in the same room as the patient. Doctors and nurses can evaluate, diagnose, treat and manage a variety of illnesses and problems over the phone, Internet or video, but in some cases the traditional way is still the best. Talk to a doctor or health care provider about whether or not telemedicine is recommended in the case of your patient or elderly relative.

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