

# Most Primary Care Telehealth Visits Unlikely to Need In-Person Follow-Up

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Last updated 24 February 2023 • Check for updates at [EpicResearch.org](https://EpicResearch.org)

## Key Findings:

- More than 60% of the time, primary care telehealth visits did not have an in-person follow-up visit in the same specialty within 90 days.
- Kids more frequently had an in-person office visit following a telehealth visit; however, more than half of the time (54%), kids did not have an in-person follow-up.
- 55% of patients with Medicare or Medicaid insurance coverage did not have an in-person follow-up after a primary care telehealth visit.

Previously, we reported that patients who had a specialty telehealth appointment often [did not require an in-person follow-up](#) appointment within the next three months.<sup>1</sup> We explored whether that same finding holds in the specialties of family medicine, general internal medicine, and pediatric primary care. We evaluated 18,636,522 primary care telehealth visits between March 1, 2020, and October 15, 2022, and looked at whether an in-person follow-up visit in the same primary care specialty occurred within the next three months.

We found that 61% of the time a patient did not have an in-person follow-up in the same specialty as their initial telehealth visit (Figure 1). General pediatrics was the most common primary care specialty to need in-person follow-up, but patients still had in-person follow-up less than half of the time.

## In-Person Primary Care Follow-up Rates

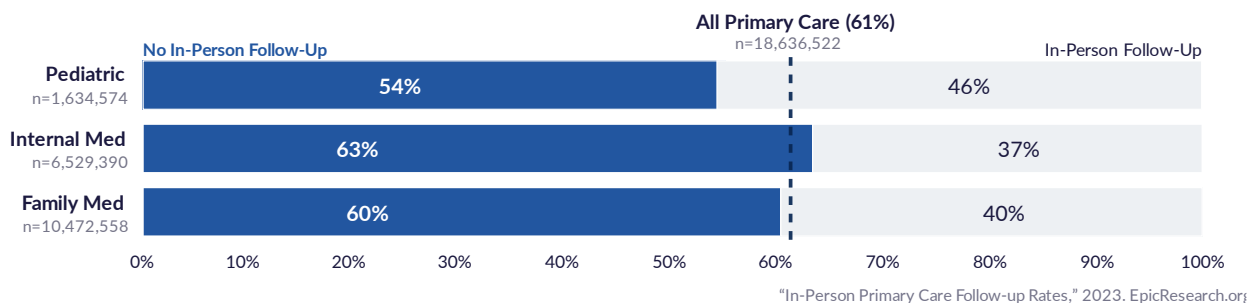


Figure 1: Same-specialty in-person follow-up within 90 days after a telehealth visit, by primary care specialty. The “All Primary Care” line represents the cumulative rates for family medicine, general internal medicine, and pediatric primary care.

We also evaluated whether there were differences in the rate of in-person follow-up based on a patient’s insurance coverage. We found that patients covered by Medicaid and Medicare had the highest in-person follow-up rates. However, 55% of the time patients did not have an in-person follow-up visit, regardless of coverage.

## In-Person Primary Care Follow-up Rates by Payer

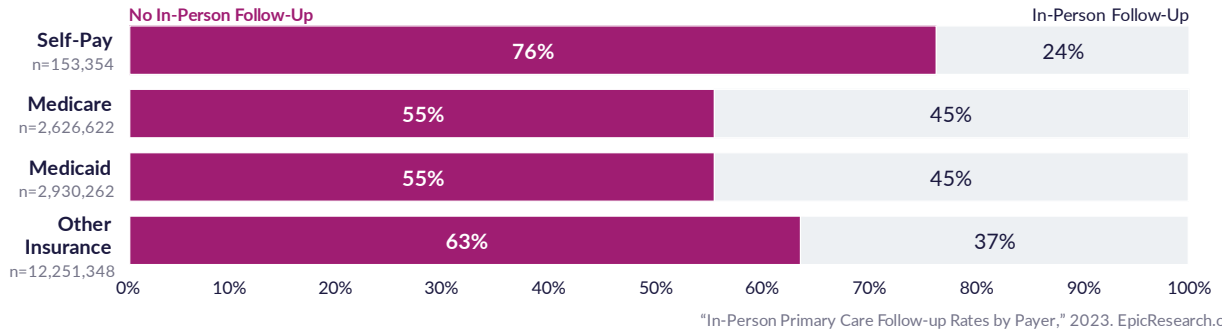


Figure 2: Percentage of primary care telehealth visits with a same-specialty in-person follow-up visit in the next 90 days, by payer type.

While primary care shows a slightly lower rate of telehealth visits without an in-person follow-up compared to the [specialties previously evaluated](#),<sup>1</sup> the 61% without a follow-up in primary care might be an underestimate. Primary care physicians treat a wide variety of conditions, so the subsequent in-person visit might not have been related to the reason for the telehealth visit. For example, a telehealth visit for an upper respiratory infection wouldn't affect whether a patient has a normal wellness exam scheduled in the next three months, yet in our study that would be counted as having had in-person follow-up.

*These data come from Cosmos, a HIPAA-defined Limited Data Set of more than 180 million patients from 190 Epic organizations including 1,123 hospitals and more than 22,500 clinics, serving patients in all 50 states and Lebanon. This study was completed by two teams that worked independently, each composed of a clinician and research scientists. The two teams came to similar conclusions.*

## References

1. Gerhart J, Piff A, Bartelt K, Barkley E. *Telehealth Visits Unlikely to Require In-Person Follow-Up Within 90 Days*. Epic Research. <https://www.epicresearch.org/articles/telehealth-visits-unlikely-to-require-in-person-follow-up-within-90-days>. Accessed: February 7, 2023.

## Data Definitions

Term	Definition
<b>Telehealth Encounter</b>	Any encounters of types: Telemedicine, E-Consult, E-Visit, Telephone with a CPT billing code, or Office Visit with a CPT billing code of 99441, 99442, or 99443.  These encounters are categorized by the specialty of the department in which they occurred.
<b>90 Day In-Person Follow-Up</b>	Any encounter in the 90 days following the Telehealth Encounter with an encounter type of Allied Health, Ancillary procedure, Anticoagulation visit, Appointment, Audiology, Case management, Clinical support, Confidential, Diagnostic services, Education, Emergency, Fetal care consult, Follow-up, Genetics, Home care visit, Hospice F2F visit, Hospital, Hospital encounter, Immunization, Induction, Infusion, Initial prenatal, Injection, Lactation consult, Lactation encounter, Multidisciplinary visit, NST, Nurse only,

	<p>Nursing home, Nutrition, Office visit, Oncology survivorship, Ophth exam, Occupational/Physical therapy, Postpartum visit, Procedural consult, Procedure visit, Radiology appointment, REI, Research encounter, Routine prenatal, Sleep study, Social work, Speech therapy, Surgery, Surgical consult, Transplant evaluation, Transplant follow-up, Treatment, Urgent care, Walk-in, or Well child.</p> <p>These encounters are categorized by the specialty of the department in which they occurred.</p>
<b>Medicaid Encounter</b>	An encounter with linked Medicaid coverage
<b>Medicare Encounter</b>	An encounter with linked Medicare coverage and no linked Medicaid coverage
<b>All Primary Care</b>	<p>An encounter from any department with a specialty in one of the following specialty groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pediatric Primary Care</li> <li>• Internal Medicine</li> <li>• Family Medicine</li> </ul>
<b>Pediatric Primary Care</b>	<p>An encounter in a department that has any of the following primary specialties (number of encounters contributed in parentheses):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adolescent Medicine (29,106)</li> <li>• Pediatric Internal Medicine (15,512)</li> <li>• Pediatrics (1,535,772)</li> <li>• Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics (54,184)</li> </ul>
<b>General Internal Medicine</b>	<p>An encounter in a department that has any of the following primary specialties (number of encounters contributed in parentheses):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preventative Medicine (14,022)</li> <li>• Primary Care (1,251,155)</li> <li>• Internal Medicine (5,168,814)</li> <li>• General Internal Medicine (95,399)</li> </ul>
<b>Family Medicine</b>	<p>An encounter in a department that has any of the following primary specialties (number of encounters contributed in parentheses):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Medicine (10,472,558)</li> </ul>

**Table 1: In-Person Primary Care Follow-Up Rates**

Specialty Group	Total Virtual Encounters	Virtual with Same-Specialty Follow-Up
All Primary Care	18,636,522	39%
Primary Care - Family Medicine	10,472,558	40%
Primary Care - Internal	6,529,390	37%
Primary Care - Pediatric	1,634,574	46%

**Table 2: In-Person Primary Care Follow-Up Rates by Payer**

Payer	Total Virtual Encounters	Virtual with Same-Specialty Follow-Up
Medicaid	2,930,262	45%
Medicare	2,626,622	45%
Other Insurer	12,251,348	37%
Self-Pay	153,354	24%