



**November 17, 2020**

**To: Eric Kurtz**

**From: American Physical Therapy Association – Colorado Chapter**

**Eliza Schultz, [eliza@schultzpa.com](mailto:eliza@schultzpa.com), 720.732.0217**

**Question: How [does] PT/OT work over telemedicine? Looking for examples of how it works in practice since it is typically a hands-on service that involves positioning patients. How do physical and occupational therapists guide patients over video?"**

Thank you for reaching out to receive more information about patient care delivered via telehealth. We are happy to provide you with any additional information or insight you need after reading through the information below. We can also arrange for a telehealth demonstration with a physical therapist if you are interested in scheduling something. We also work with the Home Care and Hospice Association of Colorado. They have had great success with occupational therapy (and other forms of therapy) provided via telehealth and can also provide you with information and resources, such as [this video](#) demonstration.

In the meantime, here is the information you requested.

The primary value of physical therapists is derived from their unique knowledge of the human movement system and the scope of their work and knowledge extends beyond any one modality that they may provide. Physical therapists provide therapeutic interventions through the expert use of their hands, their words, their environment and assistive technology.

This process of providing patient care via telehealth is mostly identical to in-person practice except that some tests and treatments are not effective or possible without physical contact. In these instances, alternate tests or treatment strategies are used to achieve a similar result, where telehealth is an appropriate forum for care. If we are unable to help a particular patient, we are duty bound as licensed professionals to direct the patient to a professional who is more appropriate to help with the specific needs of the patient.

In the case of a pediatric patients, physical and occupational therapists lean on caregivers, just as they would in an outpatient clinic setting, empowering the caregiver through demonstration (i.e. on self, on a doll), coaching, and constructive feedback individualized for caregivers based on their learning preferences. By focusing on this similar approach in the telehealth realm, the therapist educates and empowers the caregiver to take the lead in implementing and engaging in the child's progress and care long-term. The rate of intervention and "home program" carryover increases significantly, which promotes the transfer of skills across different environments and routines for the child. Putting the caregiver in the driver's seat of his/her child's therapy interventions has significant positive impact of the child's progress towards their goals.

**Diagnosis example:** As a common example of physical therapy via telehealth, let's consider an adult patient who has low back pain that radiates into their legs. There may be a number of reasons that this pain is present. In the clinic as well as via telehealth, the therapist will take the patient through a battery of tests to determine the cause of the pain and how to alleviate these symptoms. One test that would be done in person would be to lift up on the body of the patient to traction the spine. When using telehealth, the therapist is unable to traction the spine of the patient manually so the patient would be instructed with visual and verbal cues to perform a self-traction technique. The therapist would obtain input from the patient, just as they would do in person, and proceed with additional testing until enough information is gathered to determine the best course of treatment.

As with physical therapist services in the clinic, treatment via telehealth involves a number of different strategies.

Whether through telehealth or in person, physical therapists:

- Provide patient education related to their diagnosis, self-care, safety and activity/lifestyle modifications.
- Instruct patients in therapeutic exercises that require demonstration, and skilled monitoring of performance. Here is a [photo showing the demonstration of a therapeutic exercise via telehealth](#).
- Analyze faulty movement patterns and provide cues to optimize motor control.
- Provide strategies for minimizing pain and improving mobility through a variety of treatment techniques including manual therapy. If the therapist is not physically present to perform the manual therapy, he or she will instruct the patient how to safely perform mobilization to their own joints or massage to their own muscles using objects commonly found around the house, such as tennis balls, tube socks, water bottles or rolling pins. In the case of a pediatric patient, the therapist would show the movement/mobilization intervention to the caregiver through a demonstration on themselves or on a doll, and coaching the caregiver to deliver the intervention safely and effectively.

**Treatment example:** A patient had acromioclavicular (AC) joint pain (near the shoulder) and hypomobility that limited their ability to perform push-ups. In the clinic, physical therapists could elect to mobilize this joint with their hands. However, on most occasions, physical therapists prefer the patient understands how to self-mobilize this joint on their own to enhance the long-term value of their care. In this particular case, the physical therapist had the patient use their wallet in a door frame to mobilize their own AC joint. The physical therapist asked the patient to repeat the push-ups, and the pain was gone. The physical therapist did not lay a hand on the patient, the patient's pain was successfully addressed, and the patient was empowered to care for themselves using an object they carry all day long.

In summary, there are very few things that physical therapists can not do via telehealth. On the occasions when physical therapists can not complete one test or treatment option because it requires their physical presence, there are typically alternative approaches that can be used to successfully address the need. As with other areas of health care, particularly during this time of pandemic, telehealth can help patients feel more comfortable receiving care, preventing them from postponing important preventive and treatment care and developing more painful and costly health problems in the future.