



National
Multiple Sclerosis
Society

Prioritize extension and improvement of access to telehealth, and cosponsor the CONNECT for Health Act (S.2016 /H.R.4189)

Congress Must Ensure Telehealth Access Beyond the End of 2024

- Telehealth has become an important component of any modern definition of what it means to have access to comprehensive, high-quality health care.
- Since 2020, Congress and the Trump and Biden Administrations have significantly increased access to telehealth by waiving restrictions and broadening which services are covered. As a result, many providers and patients have embraced telehealth.
- Telehealth can help address health disparities prevalent in the U.S. Studies have reported high usage rates among a range of Medicare beneficiaries, including those in rural and urban areas, beneficiaries under and over age 65, and all races/ethnicities.¹
- A potential “telehealth cliff” at the end of 2024 could end the telehealth access that many people on Medicare have come to rely on.

Telehealth Expands Access to Care for People Living with MS

- People living with MS may require care from a wide range of providers, including neurology, physical therapy, urology, mental health services, ophthalmology and more.
- Many people living with MS reside in areas with limited or no MS specialists (often referred to as “neurology deserts”).
- For people with MS who live with mobility challenges, accessible transportation barriers, geographic barriers, or symptoms such as severe fatigue, telemedicine can offer meaningful access to care for those who may struggle to get it otherwise.
- 94% of MS healthcare providers and 81% of people with MS reported they want to continue using telehealth after the COVID-19 pandemic.^{2,3}

The CONNECT for Health Act (S. 2016/H.R. 4189) would:

- Permanently extend telehealth access for millions of seniors and people living with disabilities on who rely on Medicare.
- Expand telehealth access, quality, and efficiency in several ways, including:
 - Further removing restrictions on use of telehealth for Medicare providers;
 - Permitting additional access to telehealth for more types of health facilities, including rural health clinics and community health centers; and
 - Removing restrictions on certain telehealth benefits for Medicare Advantage beneficiaries, among other important protections and expansions.
- The CONNECT for Health Act would make it easier for Medicare beneficiaries to rely on telehealth to see their doctors wherever they live.

What is multiple sclerosis (MS)?

- MS is an unpredictable, often disabling disease of the central nervous system that disrupts the flow of information between the brain and body. Early treatment minimizes disease progression.
- Symptoms range from numbness and tingling to blindness and paralysis.
- The progress, severity, and specific symptoms of MS in any one person cannot yet be predicted.
- Nearly 1 million people in the United States live with MS.

Jeanette's Story - Virginia



Telehealth has been critical to my healthcare over the last three years. Without it, I would not have been able to see as many providers or address my health needs. Appointments would have been missed, I would not have been seen as quickly, and I would have put off future appointments that would have negatively impacted my overall health.

Having lived with multiple sclerosis (MS) since 2001, I know how difficult it is to diagnose, treat, and manage a complex disease. Between regular hospitalizations, changing disease modifying therapies (DMTs), and the loss of my vision, I am keenly aware of how important it is to stay on top of my health. Since Medicare loosened its telehealth regulations, I have used telehealth for appointments with my primary care physician and many of my specialists, including gynecology and psychology.

Telehealth has not only helped me to physically stay well and keep my needed appointments, but it also helped with creating a low stress environment to connect with my healthcare providers in a more personal setting. Often, when you touch that doorknob in a doctor's office, everything you have in your mind melts away as stress consumes you. With telehealth, I can manage my cognitive symptoms of MS by preparing for meetings, taking notes, and not having to memorize what my providers are sharing with me.

Additionally, telehealth has given me the ability to expand my network of providers by allowing me to see doctors outside of my driving radius. Providers are on waitlists in my area, but I can schedule with them quickly via telehealth. I am also allowed to see specialty providers I have never seen before, like my therapist, who I can meet with regularly – and stay on schedule.

Telehealth has been extremely important to me both physically and emotionally – and I hope it is one change from this pandemic that continues well beyond the global health crisis.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General Data Brief September 2022, OEI-02-20-00522

² Keszler, P; Maloni, H; Miles, Z.; Jin, S.; Wallin, M. George Washington University, VA Multiple Sclerosis Center of Excellence-East. (2021, Feb. 25). *Telehealth Utilization and Perceptions of Multiple Sclerosis Health Care Providers*. ACTRIMS 2021 Forum. <https://www.abstractsonline.com/pp8/#!/9245/presentation/197>

³ Wallin, M, personal communication, 2021, March 4. *Preliminary Data: 2020 Patient Telehealth Satisfaction Survey*.