March 2021

Telehealth and coronavirus: Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) activity in Australia
Telehealth activity graphs

Graph time-points

Pre-2020
Telehealth (videoconference) has been available in Australia on the Medicare Benefits Schedule since 2011. Largely it was only available to a small proportion of the population residing in rural and remote areas. The telehealth codes that existed prior to the coronavirus pandemic continued to be available during the pandemic, so where possible their prior and ongoing activity has been presented in the graphs starting from November 2019.

March 2020
Coronavirus telehealth and telephone codes were introduced during March 2020. They could be claimed from March 13th, but only for vulnerable populations. Therefore, the activity for telehealth and telephone consultations for March 2020 only offers an indication for the potential uptake.

Reports for March 2020 data were run on the MBS statistics website on May 6-8th 2020.

April 2020
Changes were made to the coronavirus telehealth and telephone codes on April 6th. By the end of April all Australians could receive health practitioner consultations via these alternative modalities due to the pandemic.

Reports for April 2020 data were run on the MBS statistics website on June 11th 2020. The April data did not include the codes added to the MBS on April 20th, these were added when the analysis for May 2020 was completed (this will affect the numbers reported in for allied health, specialist services and psychiatry).

May 2020
Changes were made to the coronavirus telehealth and telephone codes on May 22nd for allied health and specialist services.

Reports for May 2020 data were run on the MBS statistics website on July 9th 2020.

Once updated May data graphs were updated to include new item numbers released on April 20th and May 22nd. Each of the new items had pre-existing in-person codes that were added to the event counts since November 2019, changing the previously reported activity percentages.

June 2020
No new codes were introduced onto the scheme during June 2020.

Reports for June 2020 data were run on the MBS statistics website on July 31st 2020.

July, August and September 2020
No new codes were introduced onto the scheme during July, August and September 2020. From the start of July 2020, Telehealth GP providers will be required to have an existing and continuous relationship with a patient in order to provide Telehealth services.
Data from the MBS statistics website was unavailable from August to October 31\textsuperscript{st}, data reports for July and August returned an error message. For this reason, reports for July, August and September 2020 data were run on the MBS statistics website on October 31\textsuperscript{st} 2020.

**October 2020**
No new codes were introduced onto the scheme during October 2020.
Reports for October 2020 data were run on the MBS statistics website on December 9\textsuperscript{th} 2020.

**November 2020**
No new codes were introduced onto the scheme during November 2020.
Reports for November 2020 data were run on the MBS statistics website on January 12\textsuperscript{th} 2021.

**December 2020**
No new codes were introduced onto the scheme during December 2020.
Reports for December 2020 data were run on the MBS statistics website on February 4\textsuperscript{th} 2021.

**January 2021**
No new codes were introduced onto the scheme during January 2021.
Reports for January 2021 data were run on the MBS statistics website on February 23\textsuperscript{rd} 2021.

**February 2021**
No new codes were introduced onto the scheme during February 2021.
Reports for February 2021 data were run on the MBS statistics website on March 26\textsuperscript{th} 2021.

**Description of graph content**

**General practitioner**
This graph includes codes for general practitioners to perform standard consultations (between <5min and 45min+), consultations with people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent and Chronic Disease Management consultations.

This graph does not include any general practitioner activity claimed using codes that are specifically for mental health interventions.

Telehealth activity prior to coronavirus has been represented from November 2019 where available.

**Referred or specialist services**
This graph includes codes for specialists, consultants and other referred specialist services to perform standard consultations.

This graph does not include any activity claimed using codes specifically for psychiatrist services.

Telehealth activity prior to coronavirus has been represented from November 2019 where available.
Mental health support
This graph includes data for mental health services provided via in-person, telehealth and telephone by psychologists, general practitioners or allied health clinicians. The activity includes that from the better access initiative and the initiatives providing mental health support as a result of the droughts and bushfires.
This graph does not include any general practitioner activity claimed using codes that are specifically for psychiatrist services.
Telehealth activity prior to coronavirus has been represented from November 2019 where available.

Psychiatrists
This graph includes data for in-person, telehealth and telephone consultations with psychiatrists. Psychiatry telehealth activity was established prior to the coronavirus pandemic.
This graph does not include any activity claimed using codes for other specialist services or psychology services.
Telehealth activity prior to coronavirus has been represented from November 2019 where available.

Allied Health
This graph includes codes for any allied health consultations provided using telehealth or telephone during the coronavirus pandemic.
This graph does not include any activity claimed using codes that are specifically for mental health interventions.
Telehealth activity prior to coronavirus has been represented from November 2019 where available.

Nurse practitioners
This graph includes codes for any nurse practitioner consultations provided using telehealth or telephone during the coronavirus pandemic.
Prior to the coronavirus pandemic nurse practitioners did not provide consultations via telehealth, only patient-end support.

MBS items not included in this data analysis
- Dental practitioner consultations
- Other Medical Practitioners (OMPs) consultations
- Antenatal and midwife consultations
- Patient-end consultations
Notes from Services Australia\(^1\)

- The figures in the report include only those services that are performed by a registered provider, for services that qualify for Medicare Benefit and for which a claim has been processed by Services Australia. They do not include services provided by hospital doctors to public patients in public hospitals or services that qualify for a benefit under the Department of Veterans' Affairs National Treatment Account.

- State/Territory is determined according to the address (at the time of claiming) of the patient to whom the service was rendered.

- Month is determined by the date the service was processed by Services Australia, not the date the service was provided.

- Monthly figures may vary due to the varying number of processing days in a month, which depends on the number of days in the month, public holidays, overtime worked etc.

- Services/benefit per capita (ie. per 100,000 population) is calculated by dividing the number of services/benefit processed in a month by the number of people enrolled in Medicare at the end of that month.

- The information and data contained in the reports and tables have been provided by Services Australia for general information purposes only. While Services Australia takes care in the compilation and provision of the information and data, it does not assume or accept any liability for the accuracy, quality, suitability and currency of the information or data, or for any reliance on the information or data. Services Australia recommends that users exercise their own care, skill and diligence with respect to the use and interpretation of the information and data.

Recent publications on this topic by COH

- [Telehealth uptake in general practice as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic](https://coh.centre.uq.edu.au/telehealth)
- [Building on the momentum: Sustaining telehealth beyond COVID-19](https://coh.centre.uq.edu.au/telehealth)

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For more information

For more information, please contact Dr Centaine Snoswell or the UQ Centre for Online Health.

Suggested citation


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