



# **The promise of virtual health: Connecting care to improve health equity**



## Before 2020, virtual health care was something of a novelty.

Few people had tried connecting with their doctor through online video chats, phone appointments or remote patient monitoring. Many lacked the access needed to do so.

The COVID-19 pandemic made virtual health immediately necessary. Physicians and care teams needed to safely provide ongoing care without seeing patients in person.

Efforts to expand or roll out new systems launched quickly. They showed that virtual health could help improve outcomes and provide more equitable access to care.

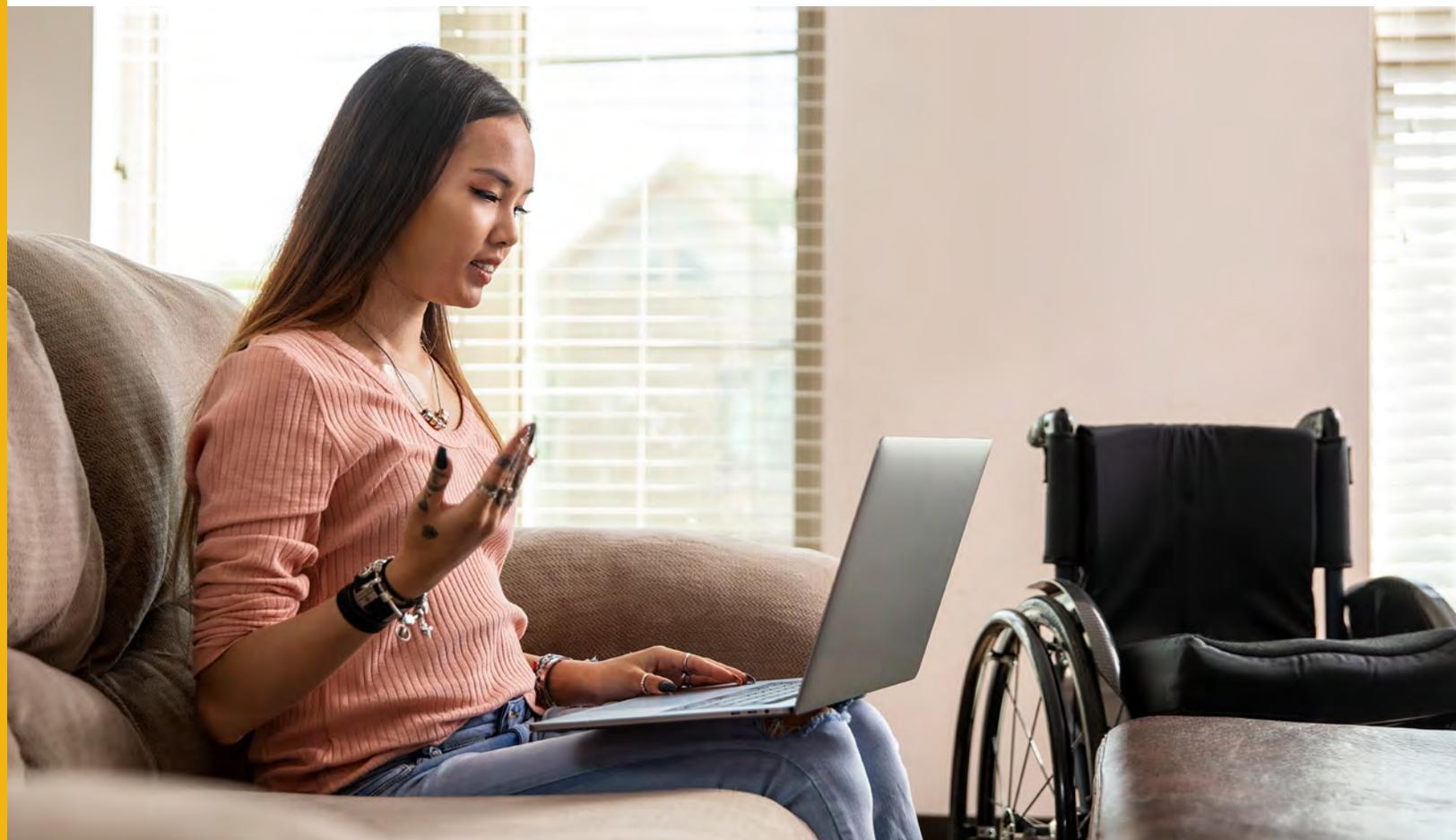
Now Optum is working to grow and evolve virtual health to meet all people where they are. That means matching the best of what technology can offer with high-quality care.

**“We’re not going to take what was done in the past and copy it in a virtual world,” says Sonia Samagh, MD, MBA, and vice president of the Optum Center for Digital Health.**

**“Just like we’re experiencing a new era of innovative technologies, the medical community has recognized the social imperative to create a more human-centered medical system for the needs of different people and diverse populations.”**

Optum is broadening its virtual health capabilities as well as those of its partners. Efforts are focused on:

- Closing gaps in care
- Creating virtual experiences that strengthen the human-health system relationship
- Connecting care across providers and facilities
- Helping providers adapt



# Virtual health kicked into high gear

**Optum learned valuable lessons from the early days of the pandemic. Teams worked swiftly to enhance our virtual health capabilities to ensure care could continue through quarantines. But it wasn't just about speed.**

We knew any solution had to address the care needs of local communities while serving people across the country. We needed to solve problems in the moment, but the solutions had to be sustainable long term.

This accelerated work on virtual health leveraged expertise and know-how across Optum networks. Thousands of dedicated professionals were committed to learning what worked (and what didn't) in real-time.

Today, Optum has its own digital health platform. And we're building our own virtual medical group — a clinic without walls — that we're launching across 50 states.

This work is being led by the Optum Center for Digital Health, which was established by Dr. Samagh last year. In just 12 months, the Digital Response team:

- Onboarded 10,500+ doctors to practice virtual health
- Completed 1.3 million additional virtual patient visits

These numbers surpassed anything from previous years by a wide margin. As the use of virtual care expands across the health system, the Center for Digital Health is committed to health equity and ensuring that new technologies and virtual capabilities close disparities, not widen them.

**Pulling together all the resources available, Optum mobilized a strategy that weaves together:**

- Video-based patient visits
- App-based acute care and chronic care management
- Digital nurse monitoring teams



# Using virtual health to close gaps in care

**The Optum Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) is central to our virtual health strategy. We use it to find gaps in care and help the most vulnerable patients.**

The SVI uses data to better understand how social determinants of health (SDOH) influence and impact peoples' health. This includes factors such as:

- Socioeconomic status
- Household composition and disability
- Minority status and language
- Housing type and transportation

**"We're more informed than ever about the diversity of our patient populations," says Dr. Samagh.**

**"We're applying learnings across our medical groups to analyze which patients would be most likely to engage with virtual health. And we see some interesting insights."**

The information gathered helps us reach people and deliver the care they otherwise might not be able to access. Many Spanish-speaking patients are showing an interest in virtual health. It also appeals to people who live far from cities or a clinic. Parents who have difficulty securing childcare benefit from virtual health, as do those who face challenges with transportation.

Optum is committed to using data to connect people with the right care through virtual health.

## Better connected care

**Advances in virtual health create opportunities to connect care in a way that enhances quality and reduces frustration. Success requires an infrastructure capable of combining the best in virtual and in-person care.**

Consider the effect on access and timeliness if, for example, a lab performed a test at an individual's home or other convenient site. Rather than waiting onsite for results, a patient could simply schedule a phone call or online video visit to follow up.

Besides ease of scheduling, virtual health technology supports mobile apps and virtual therapies that allow people to access care from wherever they are: home, work, school or anywhere else. It can link medical services and payment plans and even estimate costs.

## Easing providers through transition with equitable training

**A vital part of the promise of virtual health is better communication with health care providers.**

Optum recognizes that caring for patients through virtual health might be new to many. Depending on their resources, location, patient populations and other factors, the transition might be more challenging.

In part, that work includes teaching providers how to incorporate virtual solutions with clinical decision-making. That is the process they use to gather data, interpret it and use it to suggest evidence-based care options.

Virtual health services must meet the same standard as brick-and-mortar care delivery and help uncover opportunities to do even better.



**“When talking about health equity, we also need to provide equitable training for our physicians and care teams to help them through this transition,” says Dr. Samagh.**



# Next steps toward health equity

**Moving forward, Optum intends to apply what it learned through the process of creating the Center for Digital Health.**

Priorities include:

- Growing care navigation infrastructure
- Working toward defining standards for best practices in virtual health
- Identifying and supporting innovation that integrates the best patient care

Much of this growth in knowledge will come from listening to the people we serve. While we work toward identifying best practices in disease management and prevention, we'll also listen closely to the people who rely on the health system every day. We're learning what's important to them.

After the most difficult phases of COVID-19, in-person care is returning to pre-pandemic levels. But what we've learned points toward a digitally enabled, more equitable system that delivers the right care, at the right time, in the right location. Ultimately, that creates a better patient experience.



To learn more about how Optum is addressing health equity, visit [optum.com/healthequity](https://optum.com/healthequity)



11000 Optum Circle, Eden Prairie, MN 55344

Optum® is a registered trademark of Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are the property of their respective owners. Because we are continuously improving our products and services, Optum reserves the right to change specifications without prior notice. Optum is an equal opportunity employer.

© 2021 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved. WF4818627 07/21