

## Nurse lines and virtual visits: A complementary pair



In our rapidly changing health care landscape, OptumServe offers federal agencies cost-effective, easily accessible ways to deliver quality care to those they serve.

Nurse lines and virtual visits (also known as “telehealth”), are prime examples of solutions that are positively impacting the health care system by making health care advice and virtual care available at patients’ fingertips.

### **Nurse advice line: Around-the-clock help**

Health care-related questions or issues can come up at any time — day, night or when traveling away from home. A nurse line connects patients to effective support and health education when they need it — 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

This cost-effective program provides quick access to nurses who can discuss care options to address a patient’s — or a family member’s — symptoms. At Optum, the nurse lines are staffed by a team of registered nurses who help navigate patients along their health care journey to promote healthier outcomes.



### **About OptumServe**

OptumServe is the federal health services business of Optum and UnitedHealth Group (NYSE: UNH). We are proud to partner with the Departments of Defense, Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs and other organizations to help modernize the U.S. health system and improve the health and well-being of those we collectively serve.

With an average call waiting time of less than 30 seconds, 93% of Optum nurse line users report being satisfied with the service.

While nurse lines cannot diagnose callers' symptoms or prescribe medications, they do provide valuable services, including:

- **Assessment.** Using evidence-based clinical guidelines, nurses assess the caller's symptoms and recommend the most appropriate, cost-effective level of care, which may include self-help, seeking medical help via telemedicine, making an appointment to visit a doctor, visiting an urgent care clinic or going to the emergency room.
- **Education.** Nurses offer preventive care information, encourage medication adherence and provide education on drug interactions or medication alternatives.
- **Providers.** Nurses help members identify in-network doctors and facilities and assist with appointment scheduling.
- **Make recommendations.** Nurses make recommendations to health and wellness programs, disease management programs and behavioral health resources, as appropriate.

It's important to note that, depending on the caller's communication of his or her symptoms, nurses sometimes direct the caller to a lower level of care than the caller initially intended to pursue, and sometimes to a higher level of care.

For example, a caller who cut her finger asks if she should go to the local urgent care center. After learning that the bleeding had slowed, the nurse suggests that the caller could take care of it at home by applying firm pressure to her finger until the bleeding stops, washing with water, applying antibacterial cream to reduce the risk of infection and applying a sterile bandage. Thus, the nurse helps the caller address her symptoms while avoiding an expensive, time-consuming, late-night trip to visit a provider.

Consider another scenario. While describing his chest pains to the nurse, a caller says he thinks it might just be indigestion and he'll go back to sleep and see how he feels in the morning. When questioned by the nurse, however, the caller reveals additional symptoms that may be signs of a more serious condition, possibly even an impending heart attack. The nurse encourages the caller to seek immediate care at the emergency room. In this case, while recommending a higher-cost level of care, the nurse has potentially staved off a negative health outcome and even higher costs down the line.

### Trusted nurses

Trust is a key reason that patients rely on nurse lines. According to a 2019 Gallup poll, nurses are considered the most honest, ethical profession by Americans — the 18th successive year nurses have topped the list.<sup>2</sup>

### Virtual visits: Easy access to providers

Virtual visits are a convenient way to help patients stay healthy without leaving their home. Patients log on to their computers or mobile devices at any time of the day or night, register and, after a short wait, see and talk to a health care professional about their medical issue.

The provider can make a diagnosis and give a prescription (where permitted by law), if needed. Virtual visits are typically used for non-acute conditions, such as cold/flu, fever, bronchitis, urinary tract infection, pink eye or sore throat.



### Nurse line savings:

**\$2,606**

average savings generated by redirecting callers intending to visit the ER to a lower level of care when it's the appropriate level of care

**\$1,178**

average savings generated by redirecting callers intending to seek care other than at the ER to a lower level of care when it's the appropriate level of care<sup>4</sup>

**20+**

years of experience providing telephonic nurse line services

**600**

Optum nurse line programs serving health plans

**37M+**

beneficiaries served through Optum nurse line programs

Virtual visits can save money and time. It's been estimated that one quarter of emergency room visits could be conveniently addressed as a virtual visit.<sup>3</sup> A typical emergency room visit costs \$1,400 on average, compared to approximately \$50 for a virtual visit. Virtual care is easily accessible and, for UnitedHealthcare members, the average length of a visit is usually less than 20 minutes.<sup>5</sup>

## Complementary services

Nurse lines and virtual visit programs are compatible services which, together, are key pieces of driving down health care costs, while increasing access to the right care.

Nurse lines essentially serve as an overall trusted advisor by providing patients with a one-stop resource with a simple phone call, whether the patient needs help managing her diabetes or has a baby with a fever at midnight. If a patient isn't sure if they need a doctor, urgent care clinic or just some good health advice, one call to the nurse line can help point them in the right direction for the care and services they need.

Nurses can guide a caller to the most appropriate, cost-effective level of care, based on the symptoms the caller communicates. In some cases, the nurse may recommend that the caller have a virtual visit with a clinician. In other cases, the nurse may suggest that the lowest-cost level of care — self-help care at home — if sufficient.

Virtual visits, on the other hand, are one point of care along a continuum ranging from self-help at home to visits at a doctor's office, urgent care clinics and emergency rooms. By combining nurse lines with virtual visits, agencies can offer those they serve the best of both worlds: a trusted advisor, sound clinical advice and a fast, convenient way to see a doctor from the comfort of home.

## Conclusion

Some believe it makes sense to choose between offering patients either a nurse line or virtual visits. But in fact, the two services provide very different functions. Together, they can help federal agencies provide a cost-efficient way to keep patients healthier.

## Sources

1. Optum Book of Business Consumer Health Survey 2016.
2. Gallup, Jan. 6, 2020. Nurses Continue to Rate Highest in Honesty, Ethics by RJ Reinhart. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/274673/nurses-continue-rate-highest-honesty-ethics.aspx>.
3. Based on analysis of 2016 UnitedHealthcare ER claim volumes where ER visits are low acuity and could be treated in a virtual visit, PCP or urgent/convenient care setting.
4. Value model, based on an analysis of costs from 2016 claims.



## Nurse line = Compassionate care

**93%** of participants felt more confident after speaking with a nurse line nurse

**94%** felt they had a more positive health care experience

**95%** said that nurses are qualified and knowledgeable to help them<sup>1</sup>

## For more information:

**Visit:** [optumserve.com](https://optumserve.com)

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