Guide to a Successful Video Consultation

Guidance on Communication

Greet your patient
When both the practitioner and patient are logged into the video conference, welcome the patient and introduce yourself. Start by making sure that it is the right patient (check name and social security number), in the same way as when having a physical meeting. Ask the patient if the sound and video quality is okay. Ask the patient how it feels meeting through the screen right now. This will allow you to make sure the patient is ready for the consultation.

Make sure you are not disturbed
Keep in mind that the video consultation is “private”. It must take place somewhere suitable for the purpose. Avoid disturbances and unauthorized persons listening in on the conversation. Tell the patient that you are alone in the room—the patient can’t see that on the screen. Also ask if the patient is sitting in a suitable place.

Keep track of time—maybe offer breaks
Inform the patient about the expected durability of the video consultation to be, to make sure the patient has allocated enough time for the consultation. Tell the patient that he or she can always ask for a break during the consultation. You can ask if the patient needs a break or a glass of water if you have a feeling, that there is a need for this.

Use other senses and ask questions
During video consultations you can’t use the same senses as during physical meetings. Normally you would gain a lot of insights by observing the patient’s behavior or the environment in the patient’s home for example. This is not possible during video consultations. It is, therefore, extremely important to pose the right questions that will provide you with the knowledge about your patient in another way. In case of a patient with COPD, you could for example ask, how fast they get out of breath, when being active.

Look for non-verbal signs and body language
It may be harder to read the patient’s signals through video. Therefore, look for non-verbal signs and try to read the body language. How are the patient’s eyes: is the patient avoiding your gaze? Happy or worried? How is the body posture? Is the patient pale, ruddy etc.

Video conversations and eye contact
Be aware on how to make eye contact over video. Give the patient the experience of eye contact by looking directly into the camera. It may take some practice to look into the camera and observe the patient simultaneously. Tell the patient that, “when we are having eye contact like this, I am looking into the camera. When you see me looking down it is not because I am unfocused, but I am looking at you on my screen.”

Agree on the next steps
Before ending the conversation, it is a good idea to agree on the next steps of the treatment. Agreements on treatment methods or changes in treatment made during a video consultations are documented in the health care records in the same way that you would do in connection with a physical consultation.
Speak clearly and remember breaks in your flow of speech
Speak slowly and clearly since the video connection can cause a small delay. Make short breaks. With breaks you also give the patient, relatives or colleagues the opportunity to ask questions. It is an advantage if you vary your tone of voice and emphasize essential words.

If there are more participants in the video conversation, it is important that you do not interrupt each other. Agree on some communication rules, for example, on how to make yourself heard during the consultation.

Sit still and keep your hands height in demonstrations
Avoid sudden movements since they may cause “image noise”. Also make sure you have documents and equipment you wish to demonstrate right at hand before the consultation begins. This will minimize your need for moving during the consultation.

Also avoid clothes with narrow stripes. This makes the screen flicker. If you gesticulate with your hands to emphasize a point, lift them and make sure they can be seen on the screen.

How is your appearance on the screen?
If you are demonstrating use of equipment, make sure to keep the equipment within the camera’s angle (check what is shown to your conversational partner via the small picture of yourself called Self view). Also remember that the image that is shown to the patient is reversed. Ask the patient to repeat your instructions to make sure that they are understood correctly.

Inform your patient if you take notes during the conservation
Explain what you are doing along the way. If you want to take notes during the conversation, it is a good idea to tell the patient what is going on. Otherwise you may seem unfocused or like you are doing something irrelevant to the consultation.

Be aware that key sounds from your keyboard can be heard by your conversational partner, and may be disturbing.

Share your screen display with the patient
You may share your screen display with your conversational partner. Remember to document while the patient is included. Also when you, for example, agree on new exercises, on adjusting medicine etc.

Ask if the experience with using video was all right
By the end of the video consultation, ask how the patient experienced having a consultation using the computer, and how he or she experienced the contact. This will also allow you to make adjustments.
Practice with a colleague
Generally it is a good idea to test the equipment with a colleague before using it in a consultation. This should be done every time you use a new type of equipment. Check if the sound is clear and use “Self view” to check the camera view.

Be aware of capacity issues
Make sure that there is enough bandwidth on your connection in order to avoid lag, echo or bad image quality, which disturbs the conversation.

You can adjust the incoming and outgoing bandwidth under settings in your video program. This can improve the experienced quality.

Fixed connections for video is preferable
If the consultation takes place over the mobile network or wireless network all users of the network share the capacity. Therefore, the bandwidth may vary depending on the load on the network. A fixed-line network is preferred (broadband or fiber) and use wired rather than wireless network. This will result in a more stable connection.

Close all other programs and application
Close all other programs and applications but the video program on your computer, before you start a video consultation. This also includes electronic records. This will ensure better quality.

Agree beforehand who is going to call whom if the video connection fails during the consultation.

Use external camera and headset
If you are using a computer it may be an advantage to use an external HD camera intended for video conversations. Always use a headset with microphone to ensure better sound quality. You may experience echoes in your headset if the patient does not use a headset.

Check the angle of the camera so that your entire face is visible and centered on the screen. Also make sure that you are not filmed too much from below (check via self view).

If there are more attendees in the same room you should use an external speaker with a built-in room-microphone, which is intended for the purpose.

Put your cell phone away
Make sure there are no cell phones near the computer, since it may interfere with the video signal.

Protect private information
Make sure that you are using a secure connection to protect private information. Programs such as Skype or Facetime are not considered to be secure.

Consider a set-up with access to technical support for the patients in case of technical issues.
Advice regarding physical environment

Here is some good advice for the physical environment in rooms for video consultation. Consider establishing rooms dedicated for video consultations to make sure the dialogue can take place with respect to the patients’ privacy and in order to protect sensitive information.

Avoid open offices

Avoid sitting in an open office environment. Noise and traffic in the background (within the camera angle) distracts the conversation.

Better sound using headphones with microphone

Use of headphones with a microphone gives significantly better sound quality and may prevent unauthorized persons listening to the conversation. Also make sure there is no traffic in and out of the room.

Think about lighting and lighting effect

Make sure there is good lighting in the room, so that the image is sharp. Be aware of direct sunlight, because it affects the quality of the video image. Test the lighting effect in different weather. Turn the camera/monitor away from direct sunlight or pull the curtains.

Clean up

Think about the appearance of the room. If it's messy or there are many personal items in the image, it may seem distracting and unprofessional.

Remember ‘occupied’ sign

Put an ‘occupied’ sign on the door to the room where the video consultation takes place. Also put a sign on the wall in the background that shows which organization you belong to (for example, the logo of your hospital).

Get off to a good start

It is our hope that this guide may help you get off to a good start with video consultations, since using video provides lots of advantages for both patient and healthcare systems. It saves time for patients and gives the opportunity for frequent short contacts when needed, for example, for patients with chronic diseases. This way the treatment can be adjusted continually, and more patient safety can be obtained, for example, following a hospitalization, so that readmissions are avoided or minimized.

The dialogue is often more informal when the patient is in his or her own home, which is beneficial for both parts of the conversation. However, please remember, that not all messages are suitable for being delivered via video. If it is a matter of sensitive information, for example, informing about severe illness, you should consider an alternative. The patient may find it hard to remember what you have talked about and a physical meeting will also be preferable from an ethical perspective.

Who contributed to this guide?

This guide is based on input from clinicians in Central Denmark Region, who have used video conference equipment to deliver healthcare services over distance in consultations and diagnostics.

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