

APD Telehealth Guidelines

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Telehealth services should be delivered with the same standards and procedural considerations as for in-person services. This document outlines considerations for Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) to assist in implementing safe and effective telehealth services.

BACKGROUND

Telehealth is a method of delivering healthcare that involves the use of information and communications technology to transmit audio, images and/or data between a patient and a healthcare provider.

The International Organisation for Standardisation¹ defines telehealth as:

“Use of telecommunication techniques for the purpose of providing telemedicine, medical education, and health education over a distance.”

Many Australians have limited access to health care services due to barriers including but not limited to:

- residing in rural or remote regions
- limited health care services nearby
- limited access to services outside business hours

Telehealth or technology-based clinical consultations can offer an alternative means of providing dietetic services to Australians, not just to those affected by these barriers, and may also be used to complement existing nutrition care.

SUITABLE CANDIDATES FOR TELEHEALTH CONSULTS

Suitable candidates

- Individuals who might need to see a dietitian urgently
- Individuals who would need to travel for many hours/days to attend an in-person appointment
- Individuals who are seeking a dietitian who works in a particular practice area
- Individuals who would prefer a telehealth consultation
- Individuals who cannot access in-person dietetic services because they are elderly, frail, have a disability or have personal, caring or family responsibilities that make attending an appointment difficult (some individuals may require assistance using telehealth systems)

Candidates who may need additional supports to access telehealth

- Individuals who are hearing-impaired may need assistance from a support person or may prefer a text-based service
- Individuals who are vision-impaired may need assistance from a support person or may prefer an audio-based consultation
- Individuals with intellectual disability may need assistance from a support person
- Individuals experiencing a language barrier may require the assistance of a translator who may be in the same physical space as the client or connected via the telehealth platform
- Individuals with poor internet access may prefer a telephone-based consultation

APDs should clearly outline to their client the benefits and limitations of telehealth consultations to enable the client to make an informed decision. You may like to use the [Centre for Online Health](#) quick guides for telehealth.

QUALITY AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Telehealth consultations are within the scope of practice for APDs, but can pose a number of limitations and risks not present in in-person consultations. This is especially so when there has been no prior in-person contact between the dietitian and the client. APDs need to ensure telehealth consultations do not affect the level of client care provided.

Challenges and risks include:

- Perceptions of data safety and security
- Establishment of rapport
- Recognition of emotion
- Cultural safety
- Assessment of physical signs associated with nutritional deficiencies
- Difficulty in taking accurate and reliable anthropometric measurements
- Real-time responses if using text-based telehealth delivery

Some of these limitations may be addressed with appropriate standards set in place or may not be present depending on the type of technology used, e.g. using videoconferencing instead of telephone- or text-based consultations may allow for some assessment of physical signs and emotion.

Security of information

APDs need to introduce quality standards in their practice to safeguard the sending and receiving of information in text, audio and visual formats, and incorporate measures that enhance benefits, minimise risk and ensure authentication. Security of information being transferred via electronic means (e.g. telephone, internet) must be ensured as safe and secure by the health professional.

The [Australian Cyber Security Centre](#) provides information about cyber security to assist with safety of electronically held personal information.

Technology considerations

The hardware and software you might need will vary depending on how much telehealth service you plan to provide. When selecting technology to deliver telehealth services, consider the following:

- Quality of audio and visual communication transmitted via the platform e.g. images can be received by client in high resolution, voice can be clearly heard, internet speed supports video calls and quick file transmission
- Platforms that require clients to click a link to access the telehealth platform rather than downloading software are easy for clients to use and limit communication to pre-organised consultation times
- Whether the device and software have the most recent updates for optimum functionality and security
- Technical support available for device hardware or software
- Embedding of telehealth platform within practice software
- Secure internet connection such as using Wi-Fi Protected Access 2 (WPA-2) or virtual private network (VPN)
- Secure private connections for consultations using end-to-end encryption which is more secure than 'password protected'
- Options to enable multi-factor authentication to access device and software
- Storage of data on Australian servers
- Additional security settings that can be set on a platform

Privacy

The requirements of the [Federal Privacy Act 1988](#) are relevant to telehealth consultations. Risks around unauthorised individuals viewing client information may arise when:

- An APD uses an office space is used that allows for unauthorised individuals to see or hear private client information
- Households share a family email address, increasing the chance of individuals receiving emails not addressed to them
- Computers have a common password allowing multiple user access, increasing the potential for emails to be viewed by those other than the intended recipient
- Public computers are used, as clients may forget to sign out or may save their username and password to the computer, allowing the next person who uses the device access to the client's private information

To minimise these risks APDs must:

- Communicate to clients that total privacy cannot be guaranteed when using third party provider technology
- Ensure consent and a declaration of understanding agreement is signed or verbally obtained and recorded in the client notes before pursuing telehealth consultations (see example standard consent form in Appendix A)
- At the time of consultation, gain verbal consent and document this in the consultation notes

Records

All client records must be maintained in line with existing legislation in each State/Territory. All records must be up to date, clear, accurate and secure. More information on office systems and records may be found in the [DA Small Business Manual](#).

If you have not seen the client in-person and have not received a referral from a professional who has seen the client in-person, there is information that you must obtain before or at the beginning of the first consultation:

- Consent
- Reason for referral
- Confirmation of identity

Confirmation of identity can be achieved by asking for three patient identifiers. The following identifiers are approved in the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards:⁹

- Patient first name and surname
- Date of birth
- Gender as identified by the patient themselves
- Address including post code
- Patient record number where it exists
- Individual Healthcare Identifier (IHI)

Ensure the client is asked to provide three identifiers, rather than asking them to confirm information provided to them. A consent form should be signed by a client stating that all information they have provided during a consultation is accurate and correct.

If the client is underage, the form should be signed by a parent/legal guardian before consultations can begin. Carers/guardians will also be required to verify their identity and potentially attend the consult with the client.

Legal obligations and location

Health professionals may be subject to the legal obligations, requirements or liabilities of the state/country the client is living in, not only the state/country they are practising in. Health professionals need to be aware of any specific state-based legislation or standards of care in a country outside Australia (e.g. New Zealand) for any clients residing in a different country.

As with any aspect of their business, it is recommended that all APDs obtain personalised legal and insurance advice based on their individual circumstances.

Insurance

APDs should determine whether their professional indemnity insurance covers telehealth consultations and whether this cover extends to practice in all Australian states/territories and any other countries.

Telehealth practice policies

Before commencing telehealth consider what policies and forms you may need to develop if you do not already have them, some to consider include:

- Privacy statement that includes telehealth
- Informed consent process
- Consultation fees & cancellation policy
- Risk management plans (including emergency plans)
- Contingency plans for technological issues
- Client identification confirmation processes
- Complaints process

When a client books a telehealth appointment, it is important they are made aware of how they can access these policies, understand the fees involved and how you will obtain informed consent.

You may wish to collect information prior to the consultation such as blood test results or a referral letter and have a process for this to occur safely.

Physical Environment

Prior to commencing the telehealth consultation prepare the physical environment.

- Quiet
- Private location without interruption
- For video conferencing: Professional background (plain is best to avoid distractions) and lighting so you can be seen easily
- Camera set up at eye level
- If the client has other people in the consultation try to have everyone in view

OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES

- [APD Checklist for Telehealth](#)
- [Centre for Online Health quick guides for telehealth](#)
- [Dietitians Australia Small Business Manual](#)
- [Dietitians Australia position statement on telehealth](#)

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A - TELEHEALTH CONSULTATION CONSENT FORM

Client details	
Surname	Given names
Date of birth	Gender
Email address	
Street address	
Suburb	Postcode

I understand:

- My participation is voluntary
- I have the right to withdraw my consent
- I have the right to cease consultations at any stage
- The procedure for conducting telehealth consultations
- The Accredited Practising Dietitian will take notes during the consultation
- My referring doctor or health professional will be contacted in reference to my treatments.

My consent relates to:

- A period of care which may involve several consultations via telehealth
- The passing of information in relation to my dietetic treatment to be sent to the nominated email address, which is a secure and safe address that only I have access to
- Permission for further specified health professionals to be contacted in reference to my treatments.

I declare that all information provided on this form is true and accurate at the time of signing and that my identify is that stated on this form.

For patient over 16 years

Patient Name (Print):

Signature of Patient:

Date:

For patient under 16 years/ in care / with Guardian

Parent / Carer / Guardian Name (Print):

Signature of Parent/ Carer/ Guardian:

Date: