

Telehealth Palliative Care Helps People Living With Advanced Cancer

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Virtual palliative care can be as effective as in-person care, according to a recent study.

Oncology palliative care is intended to relieve symptoms and improve quality of life. It is not the same as hospice care, and it can help people at any stage of cancer. National guidelines recommend integrating palliative care from the time of diagnosis for people with advanced cancer, but it is underutilized in part due to a shortage of trained providers.

This study included 1,250 adults at 22 U.S. cancer centers who were diagnosed with advanced non-small-cell lung cancer. They had palliative care sessions every four weeks conducted either via video or in person.

After six months, quality-of-life scores were equivalent in the two groups. They also did not differ significantly in terms of depression or anxiety, coping skills, understanding treatment goals or perception of their prognosis.

The study started before the COVID-19 pandemic, and some people were hesitant about telehealth due to unfamiliarity or discomfort with the technology. But many later did not want to go back to in-person visits, citing greater convenience, flexible scheduling and less transportation time and cost. Telehealth can also facilitate involvement of family members and caregivers. But patients with auditory or visual impairment might benefit more from in-person care.

“Telehealth has the potential to substantially reduce burden on patients, clinicians and health care resources while maintaining quality care,” says lead investigator Joseph Greer, PhD, of Massachusetts General Hospital.

