

Tips for Capturing a Physical Exam During a Telehealth Visit

With the increasing use of telemedicine to interact and treat patients, a common provider question is “How do I capture a physical exam if I’m not physically present with the patient?” Fortunately, synchronous audio and video platforms make it possible for providers to capture almost all areas of a physical exam. Here are some ideas to help you conduct an effective physical exam during a telehealth visit.

Physical Exam Body Components

Capturing a physical exam is an essential part of a visit but ensuring that most components are properly assessed becomes challenging through a telemedicine platform. Here are some organ system-specific suggestions:

- *HEENT*: Use a flashlight or phone-based light to better visualize throat and nose. Have the patient percuss over the sinus areas for tenderness and use self-palpation for cervical lymphadenopathy.
- *Skin*: Have the patient press on the rash to observe for blanching, self-describe the rash as raised, edge of the rash and scaling. Visualize above and below the rash for streaking.
- *Cardiovascular*: Find pulses at radial, carotid, femoral and posterior tibial and dorsalis pedis locations and describe symmetry and how strong the pulse is. Observe for jugular venous distention and look for shadow or other evidence of this.
- *Abdominal exam*: Self-exam can be used for masses or organomegaly. Have patient point and describe location of symptoms such as pain. Use a family member or friend to palpate the abdomen and describe the firmness of the area and locations of pain.
- *Musculoskeletal*: Self-palpation can be used to show locations of pain or point tenderness. Range of motion of joints can be assessed as directed by clinician. Observe weight bearing for comfort and symmetry.
- *Neurologic*: Help of family member or friend can be used to test for strength and sensation. Ask about symmetry. Use flashlight to test pupillary reaction and follow a finger and observe for ocular movements. Observe gait, squat and getting up and down from a chair.

Utilize Tools

Capturing vital signs can be tricky when clinical staff is not present to measure the different components, but it’s still possible for different vitals to be captured.

- *Weight*: If the patient has a scale in the home, they can weigh themselves and report the weight during the visit
- *Height*: The patient’s height can be determined by using a yard stick or tape measurer.¹
- *Blood pressure*: Ask if the patient has a blood pressure cuff or monitor to get their blood pressure reading for the exam.
- *Temperature*: If the patient has a thermometer, they can take and report their temperature during the exam.

Different Video Devices

When starting a telehealth call, it's important to find out what type of device the patient is using so you know the device's capabilities. If the patient is using a cell phone or tablet, you can ask the patient to move the camera closer or farther away to fully access the area.

- *Ability to zoom the image:* By being able to see the patient or area closer/farther away, the provider can determine appearance of certain conditions and body parts. This is helpful with skin exams to determine the size and distribution of a lesion.
- *Image rotation:* The ability for the camera to be moved throughout the visit allows providers to witness certain areas and body mechanics to assist in the medical decision making. This is useful for musculoskeletal injuries because it allows the provider to witness the patient's gait for abnormalities as well as assist the patient in physically pressing on areas to determine the extent of the injury/symptom.

In addition to different devices, there are also multiple audio and video platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft teams, Skype, and FaceTime to help you connect to your patients.

Utilizing Family and Friends

It can be challenging to fully assess some parts of the physical exam due to patient limitations. For these instances it's useful to ask if someone else is with the patient to help assist during the exam. See the physical exam body components for examples on how a family member or friend can help assist in abdominal or neurologic exams.

Other Useful Tips

Here are additional tips to help capture components of a physical exam.

- **Heart Rate:** The patient's heart rate can be captured by asking the patient to find their radial pulse and count the beats out loud for 15 seconds. In addition to determining the patient's heart rate, this will allow the provider to identify any irregularities in the beats and changes in speed.
- **Respiratory Rate:** Visualization of the patient breathing for 15 seconds allows the provider to capture the respiration rate as well as witness a degree of distress.

If the provider is unable to capture any of the exam components due to the lack of a measurement tool or friend/family member to assist, it should be documented within the chart note that the patient was asked but due to the lack of resources that part of the exam could not be completed.

The content for this tip sheet came from the [Telemedicine: Conducting an Effective Physical Exam](#) course by Thomas Jefferson University. For other questions, please contact your Quality and Risk Adjustment Provider Clinical Consultant. LifeWise does not provide medical advice. Healthcare providers need to use their own discretion and expertise when conducting a telehealth visit.

ⁱ 1 NCQA does not allow for patient collected biometric data to be used to calculate BMI