

# Rural Older Adults' Experience of Telehealth Services

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## INTRODUCTION

- The rural older adult population is rapidly increasing, contributing to greater need for healthcare, social services and support for aging adults despite healthcare and mental health professional shortages (Federal Interagency Forum of Aging-Related Statistics, 2020).
- Telehealth provides an alternative way to access medical and mental health care and social services in shortage areas.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, use of telehealth increased, including among older adults (Baum et al., 2021).
- Beyond COVID-19, telehealth may serve as important resource to address care access challenges among older adults in rural areas.
- Examination of older adults' experiences with telehealth may provide guidance about needed supports to sustain use of telehealth means to access care.

## METHODS

A qualitative approach was used to understand the experiences of rural older adults who have used telehealth to access medical, mental health, or social services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. **Recruitment:** Participants were recruited through primary care providers, senior centers, and mental health service providers.
2. **Interviews:** The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of questions inquiring about benefits of telehealth, challenges to participation, and ideas for improvement. Participants were compensated with a \$75 Walmart or Amazon gift card.
3. **Participants:** Rural older adults, 60 years old or older, (n=20) in the Rocky Mountain region.
4. **Analysis of Data:** Data were analyzed using the Framework Method to generate an organized structure of inductively and deductively derived themes.

## Benefits

### Ease of Access to Healthcare

- Convenience
- Comfort
- Sense of Safety
- Easy to Use

### Increased Access to Healthcare

- Access to specialist care
- Access to healthcare despite physical/situation barriers

### COVID-19 Safety Measure

### Facilitates Social Connections

- Personal interactions during the pandemic
- Important sense of support
- Contributed to improved mental health

## Challenges

### Technology Difficulties

- Technology or telehealth platform not working
- Unfamiliar with technology and/or telehealth
- Need support to use technology

### Limits of Telehealth

- Unable to complete parts of physical examinations
- Difference in interpersonal interactions

### Poor Coordination/Implementation



## DISCUSSION

- Results support the important role that telehealth can have in increasing access to healthcare for rural older adults.
- Participants in this study not only found telehealth to be a convenient way of accessing services, but also indicated increased access to specialist care, which is a major challenge in most rural areas.
- Convenience and comfort are significant benefits of telehealth, particularly for rural older adults who face significant barriers to accessing healthcare for much of the year due to extreme weather and distance.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, telehealth services provided older adults with an increased sense of safety and social connection.
- Most participants reported some challenges in using telehealth either due to technology difficulties or poor coordination/implementation by the healthcare system.
- Ideas for improving telehealth for other older adults include:
  - Additional instruction/technical support for older adults using telehealth
  - Improvement of technology
  - Decreased cost
  - Additional training for health care professionals
  - Dedicated location available for telehealth visits
  - Increased availability for same day visits

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