



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Health**

# **Better Access Telehealth initiative for rural and remote patients**

## **Guidelines**

### **Introduction**

1. On 19 April 2017, the Australian Government announced the introduction of a new measure, *Telehealth measure to improve access to psychological services for rural and remote patients*, to improve access to mental health treatment services for people in rural, remote and very remote locations (Modified Monash Model areas 4 - 7).
2. From 1 November 2017, patients in rural, remote and very remote locations are able to claim rebates for video consultations through the Medicare Benefits Schedule Better Access initiative.
3. The measure also allowed up to seven of ten Better Access mental health consultations to be provided via videoconference.
4. In addition, one of the first four sessions was required to be delivered through a face-to-face consultation to facilitate a personal connection with the mental health professional.
5. On 5 August 2018, the Australian Government announced changes to the measure so that people can access Medicare Better Access services via videoconference without leaving home.
6. From 1 September 2018, ten consultations per calendar year can be delivered via videoconference without the requirement for a face-to-face consultation.
7. For existing patients who commenced Better Access telehealth services prior to 1 September 2018, the face-to-face requirements will no longer apply to any remaining allowable sessions from 1 September 2018.
8. From 1 November 2018, General Practitioners and medical practitioners that have met the mental health skills training and accreditation requirements as set out by Medicare are eligible to deliver services under the Better Access Telehealth initiative. This is in addition to psychologists, eligible occupational therapists and social workers already eligible to deliver Better Access telehealth services.
9. There are no changes to other conditions of the service, including time, number of allowable sessions per year, referral requirements, or co-payment arrangements.

10. These changes were implemented by amending the Medicare Benefits Schedule and relevant determinations, including the Health Insurance (Allied Health Services) Determination 2014.

**Name of the measure**

11. The title of this initiative is Telehealth measure to improve access to psychological services for rural and remote patients.

**Implementation date**

12. This measure was implemented on 1 November 2017 and changes to the Medicare Benefits Schedule took effect from that date.
13. From 1 September 2018, the face-to-face requirements no longer apply and related changes to the Medicare Benefits Schedule will take effect from that date.
14. From 1 November 2018, eligible general practitioners and eligible medical practitioners will be able to deliver focussed psychological strategies via videoconference.

**What are the patient eligibility requirements of this measure?**

15. Services under this measure are available to patients with an assessed mental disorder who would benefit from a structured approach to their treatment needs.
16. The conditions classified as mental disorders for the purposes of these services are informed by the World Health Organisation, 1996, Diagnostic and Management Guidelines for Mental Disorders in Primary Care: ICD-10 Chapter V Primary Care Version.
17. The person receiving care must be located in Monash Modified Model areas 4 -7.
18. The person receiving care must:
  - a be eligible for Medicare rebates; and
  - b not be admitted to hospital at the time; and
  - c not a patient of an emergency department at the time; and
  - d be located both:
    - i. within a telehealth eligible area at the time of the appointment; and
    - ii. located at least 15 kilometres by road from the eligible health practitioner.

**Where can Better Access Telehealth services be provided?**

19. The patient must be in Modified Monash Model areas 4-7 at the time of the consultation and at least 15 kilometres apart from the eligible treating health practitioner by direct road at the time of consultation.
20. The patient, or their treating health practitioner, is not able to travel to a place to meet the 15 kilometres minimum distance requirement.

21. Commonwealth subsidised residents of a residential aged care facility are not able to receive Better Access telehealth services.
22. More information about the Modified Monash Model, including links to a search tool to identify the classification of a specific location, is available at: [Modified Monash Model](#)
23. The treating health practitioner can be located anywhere in Australia, subject to the 15 kilometre minimum distance requirement being met.

#### **Can Better Access telehealth services be provided in hospital?**

24. Medicare and DVA rebates are not payable for video consultations with an admitted hospital patient. This applies to both public and private admitted patients and those patients located in emergency departments.

#### **Who is eligible to bill video consultations?**

25. Better Access telehealth services can be delivered by eligible health practitioners, specifically, psychologists, eligible occupational therapists and social workers, and eligible general practitioners and medical practitioners.
26. All health practitioners wishing to deliver Psychology Therapy Services and Focussed Psychological Strategies (FPS) using Medicare items must be registered with Medicare Australia as meeting the eligibility requirements of the items.
27. A video consultation for allied mental health services for Psychology Therapy Services can be provided by eligible clinical psychologists.
28. A video consultation for FPS can be provided by eligible registered psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists.
29. General Practitioner and Medical Practitioner Focussed Psychological Strategy items can be provided by eligible registered general practitioners and medical practitioners that are registered with Medicare as having completed the General Practitioner Mental Health Standards Collaboration mental health skills training and related accreditation requirements.
30. It is recommended that health practitioners providing FPS services maintain their skills through continuing professional development (CPD) in accordance with the professional and Medicare registration requirements.
31. General Practitioners cannot bill for video consultations to prepare or review Mental Health Treatment Plans.

#### **What services can be provided?**

32. Better Access telehealth services can be provided to offer a full intervention package for the patient's condition. In addition to psycho-education, it is recommended that cognitive behaviour therapy be provided. However, other evidence-based therapies, such as interpersonal therapy, may be used if considered clinically relevant.

33. A range of evidence-based strategies has been approved for use by treating health practitioners utilising the Better Access FPS Medicare items. There is also flexibility to include narrative therapy for patients of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. Further details on Focussed Psychological Strategies are provided on [the Department's website](#).

**What services are available under current Better Access arrangements?**

34. Under the Better Access initiative, Medicare rebates are available for up to ten individual and ten group allied mental health services per calendar year to patients with an assessed mental disorder who are referred by:
- A GP managing the patient under a GP Mental Health Treatment Plan; or
  - Under a referred psychiatrist assessment and management plan; or
  - A psychiatrist or paediatrician (Psychiatrists and paediatricians are able to directly refer patients with mental disorders for Medicare rebatable allied mental health telehealth services).
35. The ten individual services may consist of: GP Focussed Psychological Strategies services (items 2721 to 2731); and/or Medical Practitioner Focussed Psychological Strategies services (items 283 to 287 and 371 to 372); and/or Psychological Therapy Services (items 80000 to 80015); and/or Focussed Psychological Strategies – allied mental health services (items 80100 to 80115; 80125 to 80140; 80150 to 80165).
36. The ten group services may consist of: Psychological Therapy Services (items 80020 and 80021); and/or Focussed Psychological Strategies – allied mental health services (items 80120, 80121, 80145, 80146, 80170 and 80171).
37. Referring practitioners may refer patients for a maximum of six Better Access consultations on any one referral. A further referral from a GP or psychiatrist/paediatrician is required for up to four additional sessions to a maximum of ten individual and ten group services per calendar year.

**What are the changes introduced through the Telehealth measure to improve access to Better Access services for rural and remote patients?**

38. Changes introduced to Medicare enable up to ten annual Better Access mental health consultations to be provided via videoconference by eligible health practitioners which include psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, General Practitioners and medical practitioners.
39. More information about the Telehealth attendance items to be used when claiming for Better Access telehealth consultations is available at the Department of Health [MBS Online website](#).
40. General Practitioners and Medical Practitioners can bill for video consultations to deliver GP Focussed Psychological Strategies to their patients either as face-to-face services (items 2721 to 2727 and 283 to 287) or via videoconference (items 2729 to 2731 and 371 to 372).

## **What is the Medicare schedule fee for a video consultation?**

41. Under the Better Access initiative, new items for Telehealth services will be available at the same rebate as the existing ten face-to-face eligible services for allied health providers. More detailed information about the Medicare schedule fee for a video consultation is available at the Department of Health [MBS Online website](#).

## **What is a video consultation?**

42. For the purposes of this initiative, a video consultation is where a patient and an eligible health practitioner undertakes a referred consultation via videoconferencing (i.e. visual and audio link). There must be a visual link between the patient and the eligible health practitioner in order to bill a video consultation and in order for the patient to claim for the Medical Benefits Schedule (MBS) Telehealth rebates.

## **What are the technical requirements for a video consultation?**

43. The Government is not mandating or endorsing any particular technical solution for telehealth. In providing MBS billed telehealth services, the treating health practitioner should be confident that the technical solution they choose is:
  - capable of providing sufficient video quality for the clinical service being provided; and
  - sufficiently secure to ensure normal privacy requirements for health information are met.
44. The treating health practitioner will need to be confident that the technology used is able to satisfy the item descriptor and that software and hardware used to deliver a videoconference meets the applicable laws for security and privacy. More information is provided at the MBS online [technology and technical issues page](#). The Australian Psychological Society also provides advice on [Principles for choosing videoconferencing technology](#).

## **Further information**

### **Useful links for providers**

For further information about Medicare Benefit Schedule items, please go to the Department of Health's website at [MBS Online website](#).

Further information is also available for providers from the Department of Human Services (DHS) provider inquiry line on 132 150.

The DHS has developed a Health Practitioner Guideline to substantiate that a valid Allied Mental Health service has been provided by Allied Mental Health professionals which is located on the [DHS website](#).

Information regarding eligibility, claiming and payment processes can be obtained from Medicare Australia on 132 011 or on the [Medicare website](#).

Useful information may also be available on the following professional association websites:

Australian Psychological Society

[www.psychology.org.au/](http://www.psychology.org.au/)

Mental Health Professionals Network

<https://www.mhpn.org.au/>

Occupational Therapy Australia

<https://www.otaus.com.au/>

Australian Association of Social Workers

<https://www.aasw.asn.au>

Royal Australian College of General Practitioners

[www.racgp.org.au/](http://www.racgp.org.au/)

Advice about registering with the Department of Human Services to provide Focussed Psychological Strategies is available from the Department of Human Services provider inquiry line on 132 150.

**Useful link for patients and carers**

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-ba-telehealth>

**Useful link for health practitioners**

Information about telehealth services can be located on the [Australian Psychological Society website](#) including information for consumers, referrers and providers.