



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

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

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **What is the Better Access Telehealth initiative?**

Eligible patients in rural and remote locations with a Mental Health Treatment Plan are able to claim rebates for video consultations through the Medicare Benefits Schedule Better Access initiative.

Relevant services can be delivered by eligible health practitioners, that are eligible to provide Medicare rebatable services under the Better Access initiative, that is:

- psychologists;
- occupational therapists;
- social workers;
- general practitioners; and
- medical practitioners.

#### **When will the initiative commence?**

The initiative commenced on 1 November 2017. From 1 September 2018, Medicare changes took effect so that all allowable sessions can be conducted via videoconference. From 1 November 2018, further changes to Medicare allow eligible general practitioners and medical practitioners to deliver focussed psychological strategies to eligible patients located in Modified Monash Model areas 4 -7 via videoconference.

#### **What is a telehealth eligible area?**

The Better Access Telehealth items are available to people living in Modified Monash Model areas 4-7. The Modified Monash Model is a classification system that categorises metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas according to both geographical remoteness and town size. More information about the Modified Monash Model, including a search tool to identify the classification of a specific location, is available at: [Modified Monash Model](#).

#### **Why is this new initiative needed?**

Better Access Telehealth services have been introduced to enhance ease of access to, and increase choice in, mental health services in rural and remote areas of Australia. It is widely recognised that there is a scarcity of mental health professionals in some of the more remote areas of Australia, and this can act as a significant barrier for those who need to access these services.

The demand for mental health services in rural and regional Australia is growing, including in regions impacted by drought. Enhanced telehealth arrangements will enable Australians who live

in rural and remote Australia to claim a Medicare rebate for video consultations for mental health consultations with eligible health practitioners.

### **Who will benefit from the Better Access Telehealth initiative?**

Better Access Telehealth services are available to patients with an assessed mental disorder who would benefit from a structured approach to their treatment needs. People who might otherwise have not been able to take up mental health therapy services because of where they live will have access to services from their home or other convenient location via videoconference.

This improved access will allow people in need of mental health therapy services to receive prompt treatment, and reduce any potential inconvenience, time and expense of having to travel to larger regional centres or major cities for sessions with their treating health practitioner.

### **What services will be available?**

Medicare rebates are available for up to ten individual and ten group mental health therapy services per calendar year (1 January – 31 December) to patients with a Mental Health Treatment Plan who are referred for mental health therapy services.

Under the Better Access Telehealth initiative, eligible health practitioners are able to deliver up to ten sessions per calendar year by videoconference for eligible patients, that is, those with clinically diagnosed mental disorders who are living in rural and remote locations.

Relevant services can be delivered by eligible health practitioners, that is, psychologists, occupational therapists, social workers, general practitioners and medical practitioners that meet the relevant registration requirements under Medicare.

### **Does Medicare cover video consultations for groups?**

Yes. Under the Better Access Telehealth initiative, video consultations are available for groups of six to 10 patients. The usual requirements for a Better Access group session will apply. The treating health practitioner will need to determine whether a group consultation is suitable, safe and clinically appropriate.

### **Can a person access services from their current Better Access provider via telehealth?**

If a person with a mental illness living in a rural or remote area is already accessing Better Access consultations and they have an existing therapeutic relationship with an eligible health practitioner, they may be able to consult their preferred provider through videoconference provided that:

- the patient is resident in a telehealth eligible area and is located at least 15 kilometres by road from the eligible health practitioner; and
- the health practitioner meets the relevant Medicare registration requirements.

### **How will potential patients become aware of clinicians offering video consultations?**

New patients are encouraged to speak with their General Practitioner or medical practitioner to discuss the potential availability and suitability of Better Access services via videoconference.

Patients who are currently receiving Better Access services are encouraged to speak with their GP and/or treating allied mental health professional to find out if video consultations are available through their current provider.

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

Australian Psychological Society

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

<http://www.believeinchange.com/Home/Become-the-Change/Find-A-Psychologist>

Occupational Therapy Australia

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

<https://www.otaus.com.au/find-an-occupational-therapist>

Australian Association of Social workers

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

<https://www.aasw.asn.au/find-a-social-worker/search/>

Royal Australian College of General Practice

<https://www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/mh/>

<https://www.racgp.org.au/education/gps/gpmhsc>

### **How many consultations are funded through Medicare?**

Patients will be able to claim up to 10 individual items and 10 group items per calendar year. These can be accessed by videoconference and/or face-to-face by eligible patients in Modified Monash Model areas 4-7.

### **Will more than ten sessions be available via telehealth in exceptional circumstances?**

All patients referred for Better Access services are eligible for ten sessions per calendar year. If the patient is in Modified Monash Model areas 4-7, sessions can be via videoconference. After six sessions, the patient will need to return to the referring practitioner for review and potential referral for further sessions. Once a patient has accessed their maximum number of Medicare funded telehealth sessions, no additional telehealth sessions are available.

### **What is Better Access?**

The Better Access initiative is funded through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) and provides Medicare rebates to patients for selected mental health therapy services provided by eligible General Practitioners and medical practitioners, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists.

The Better Access initiative was introduced to address low treatment rates for high prevalence mental disorders such as depression and anxiety – particularly presentations of mild to moderate severity where short term evidence based interventions are most likely to be useful. It aims to improve outcomes for people with a clinically-diagnosed mental disorder through evidence-based treatment.

### **How does the Better Access Telehealth initiative differ from current Better Access arrangements?**

The Telehealth and standard face-to-face Better Access items are similar in that they provide rebates for up to ten individual and ten group mental health therapy sessions in a calendar year to patients with an assessed mental disorder who are referred by:

- a General Practitioner managing the patient under a GP Mental Health Treatment Plan; or
- a psychiatrist or paediatrician.

The ten individual services may consist of focussed psychological strategies, psychological therapy services (provided by a clinical psychologist), and/or focussed psychological strategies provided by an eligible health practitioner.

The Better Access Telehealth initiative also requires patients to be located in Modified Monash Model areas 4-7 and at least 15 kilometres by road from the eligible treating practitioner.

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.

**Must a video link be provided or is telephone only consultation sufficient?**

The requirement for a video link to form part of the consultation is an essential element to enable a claim for telehealth attendance items. 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.

The individual eligible 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 video conference meets the applicable laws for security and privacy. More information is provided at the [technology and technical issues page](#) on the Department of Health's MBS online website.

**Can Medicare telehealth benefits be paid if the session is conducted via online chat box/messaging?**

For a Medicare telehealth benefit to be paid for the telehealth service, a visual and audio link must be established with the patient. Medicare telehealth benefits are not payable for email or telephone consultations. This would include online chat box/messaging as there is no visual and audio link.

**Will telehealth consultation be suitable for all patients requiring psychological counselling?**

Better Access consultations via videoconferencing may not be appropriate for all patients, particularly if there is concern that a person is at risk of doing harm to themselves or others, or if the patient does not have access to reliable or affordable broadband and/or technology required for video conferencing.

The Department has funded the Australian Psychological Society to provide information, resources and operational advice to eligible health practitioners on:

- the initial assessment requirements to ensure the person and their presentation is suitable to be a recipient of Better Access telehealth services;
- risk management procedures for managing patients at risk of self-harm or harm to others when delivering services via videoconferencing; and
- the principles for choosing high quality, safe technology to deliver Better Access telehealth services.

In addition, each of the relevant professional associations has undertaken to promote and explain the Better Access telehealth initiative to their members, and contribute to any directories identifying appropriately skilled health practitioners.

**Where can I find more information?**

The Australian Government has developed Guidelines and this FAQ document to support the implementation of this initiative and will continue to provide updated information through the Health website.

The Australian Government has also funded the Australian Psychological Society (APS) to develop additional information and resources for health practitioners and consumers to support the safe and effective implementation of this initiative. More information about these resources is available through the APS website.

General Practitioners and medical practitioners who are interested in learning more about becoming an eligible provider of Focussed Psychological Strategies can visit the [General Practice Mental Health Standards Collaboration website](#).

**Does Medicare cover short-term telehealth sessions for patients who briefly travel overseas?**

Medicare in general does not cover services received outside Australia.

**Are there any changes to Medicare payment claiming processes that apply to Better Access telehealth services?**

No. There are no changes to the Medicare payment claiming processes. More information for Health professionals, including Medicare payment claiming forms and processes, is available through the [Department of Human Services website](#).

**Can the Telehealth for rural and remote patients be accessed by young people 12 - 25 years old?**

Patient age restrictions do not apply to accessing telehealth MBS services. However, Better Access telehealth services can only be provided to a patient who is:

- a non-admitted patient; and
- is eligible for Medicare rebates; and
- is located in an Eligible Geographical Area, Modified Monash Model regions 4-7, and is more than 15 kilometres from the treating health practitioner at the time of consultation.

The treating health practitioner would need to determine whether a Better Access telehealth service is suitable, safe and clinically appropriate for patients of all ages.

**As a provider of the former Access to Allied Psychological Services or Psychological Therapy Services available through Primary Health Networks (PHN), will telehealth sessions be available under the PHN gap free sessions?**

PHNs can commission telehealth services, but patients and providers would need to contact their local PHN to seek advice on whether this is available in their area.