

Guide: Telehealth Basics for Nutrition Professionals



Are you considering counseling clients virtually? 🙌

The age of technology has transformed almost every aspect of modern life, and how we give and receive healthcare is no different. Over the past few years, we've seen a dramatic demand and rise in virtual health services.

Initially, we've seen telehealth used broadly by primary care physicians, dermatologists, radiologists, and psychiatrists, but is now rapidly expanding throughout healthcare to include registered dietitians and other wellness professionals. As the industry evolves, there is a demand for technology to meet the specific needs of private practice dietitians providing telehealth nutrition services.

Checklist: Practicing Telehealth in Nutritional Care

- ☐ Check your state licensure laws
- ☐ Research state licensure laws in your client's state
- ☐ Confirm your liability insurance covers for telehealth
- ☐ Choose a HIPAA-compliant method of client communication
- ☐ Use a billing platform to collect payments online
- ☐ Have clients sign a telehealth consent form

What is “Telehealth” and “Telenutrition”

Telehealth is generally used to cover “telecommunications and exchange of electronic information” to support long-distance health care. As a broad term, telehealth includes nutritional care. Specifically, telehealth nutrition (telenutrition) is the provision of nutritional care, virtually. Telehealth and telenutrition include communication over the internet, video-conferencing, e-mail or fax, and other methods of distance communications for communication of broad-based nutrition information.

One thing to keep in mind: a wellness practice that provides telehealth nutrition services, does not necessarily *only* provide virtual services. You can incorporate virtual care into your nutrition practices as a valuable add-on service for your clients. Many successful practices offer a mix of in-person and virtual services to help enhance their business and improve client retention.

Benefits of Providing Telehealth Nutrition Services

Both clients and practitioners recognize, more than ever, that virtual care is an effective and flexible means to receive and provide high quality nutrition and wellness services. The widespread use of apps and smartphones have made integrating telehealth and technology a reality for practitioners and patients.

- Flexibility and convenience in your work schedule: work from home or wherever you’d like! Set your hours and availability for the day, and create a schedule that ultimately works for you.
- Savings on time and money: Save your clients (and yourself) the time and expenses of commuting to appointments. You’ll be able to invest that saved time into building your wellness business.
- Lower startup costs: If you’re looking to launch your business, starting out by providing telehealth nutrition services can help save you overhead costs — set up a home office and save yourself rent, utilities and other fees associated with a separate office location.
- Closer relationships with clients: Technology makes it easier to connect with clients – in addition to video-conferencing sessions, message with patients, share documents, and more, to build long-term, effective relationships.
- Increased access to care for clients: Clients in remote locations now have the ability to receive quality care, thanks to telehealth!
- Expanded educational reach: With telehealth nutrition, you can access more individuals at one time, with webinars and group counseling sessions.

- Clients will love the convenience of virtual care: It's more accessible for those who are unable to commit because of commute time, or for those who don't live in a reasonable distance for specialized care.
- Improved client retention and outcomes: Using the tools offered by telehealth nutrition to engage with your client more often gives you more revenue and better brand reputation.

👉 Step 1. Check Your State Licensure Laws

Currently 47 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia have statutory provisions regulating the dietetics profession or associated titles such as "dietitian" and "nutritionist". In most states, this means that there is either licensure or certification that one must obtain through your State Board in order to be legally credentialed.

Telehealth in the United States is currently affected by laws and regulations at the federal and state levels. In short, this means that telehealth laws, regulations, and reimbursements are determined by each state government -- making it impossible to have a "uniform" telehealth policy. In addition, some states specifically restrict practice to providers who hold a state-issued telehealth certificate or other similar permissions, although this primarily refers to physicians.

Healthie cannot provide individual legal advice. However, here are some resources and terminology to help you understand state licensure laws pertaining to telehealth.

Ultimately what you want to determine: Am I qualified to provide medical nutrition therapy services in my state?

Licensure and Telehealth Resources:

👍 View the Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics (AND) [licensure map](#) to find state-by-state licensure requirements as well as contact information for state licensing agencies.

Here is a quick interpretation of the AND licensure map:

- ➔ Red states have strict licensure
- ➔ Green states have title protection or certification
- ➔ Yellow states have no formal regulation, but do have title protection
- ➔ Gray states have no licensure laws or practice exclusivity

👍 Visit the [Center for Connected Health Policy](#) for more information on individual state laws and telehealth reimbursement regulations.

Important Licensure Terminology:

Title Protection:

The statute restricts the use of one or more specified titles, which may include "registered dietitian," "registered dietitian nutritionist," "licensed dietitian," "licensed dietitian nutritionist," "LD," "LDN," or other titles. States prohibit any public representation of one's qualifications as making them *eligible* to practice as a licensed dietitian nutritionist, but the statute does not restrict the actual *practice* of dietetics or MNT.

Practice Exclusivity:

The statute either broadly precludes the practice of dietetics and nutrition or, more narrowly, the provision of medical nutrition therapy without a state-issued license. The 28 states and the District of Columbia regulating the practice of dietetics or MNT are colored red or yellow on the map, indicating that practitioners must be licensed in order to practice there — although there may be exemptions enabling practice for a short duration or for a small subset of dietetics and nutrition services. These states usually also regulate the use of certain titles through a title protection provision as described below.

Parity laws:

The equivalent treatment of analogous services between in-person health services reimbursements and telehealth nutrition reimbursements. Parity laws are also determined by each state.

👉 Step 2. Check State Licensure Laws in Your Client's State

Knowing your state licensure laws is the first step in telehealth compliance. The second step is researching telehealth and licensure laws in your client's home state. Practicing across state lines can be difficult to navigate. Licensure laws are essentially in place to help ensure that only qualified nutrition professionals (ie. licensed dietitians) are providing medical nutrition therapy. Even though you may be a licensed professional in your state, you are not automatically licensed in every US state. You must refer to the licensure and telehealth laws in your client's home state to be fully compliant.

Ultimately what you want to determine: Am I qualified to provide medical nutrition therapy services in my client's state?

👍 Action: Revisit the AND licensure map and locate your client's state.

- ➔ Does your client reside in a state that has strict licensure? (ie RED states)
- ➔ If you are not licensed in this state, then MNT services should not be provided across state lines

Exemptions in providing MNT services across state lines

Some states offer exemptions to licensure requirements under certain circumstances, including allowing:

- Practicing for a limited, specified period of time, such as up to five days consecutively or a maximum of 30 days per year
- Practicing under another state's license if the requirements for licensure in the other state are substantially similar to those of the desired state
- Practicing obesity or weight loss counseling under certain circumstances, such as helping a client follow a program developed by an RDN, physician or other qualified individual
- Practicing solely via non-individualized group therapy sessions

✨ Regulations are specifically created to control which practitioners can provide MNT services. General health coaching is not specified in the regulations, so many dietitians choose to provide MNT services in their licensed states and more general health coaching across state lines. Given this is a gray area of practicing, you'll want to contact the State agency for any state you wish to counsel clients in, to verify legal obligations.

👉 Step 3. Confirm That Your Liability Insurance Covers Telehealth

Every nutrition professional seeing clients privately should have professional liability insurance. This will help protect you, and your business, in the case of a lawsuit. If you already have liability insurance, then you can call your insurer and ask if your current plan covers for telehealth/virtual nutrition services.

If not, you'll need to obtain a plan that does protect you when providing virtual care.

👉 Step 4. Choose a HIPAA-compliant Method of Client Communication

Before taking a leap into telehealth nutrition appointments, make sure your intended method of communication is HIPAA-compliant. This will ensure that your client's private health information remains secure. Popular telehealth methods, such as Facetime, Skype, text messages, and many more are not HIPAA-compliant and could leave your client's private health information vulnerable. You must create a Business Associate Agreement (BAA) with the third-party communication service provider to require that they uphold HIPAA compliance within their own secure system.

✨ For Healthie members: the Healthie Telehealth platform is HIPAA-compliant, so you can be confident that your clients' information is being kept secure.

👉 Step 5. Use a Secure Billing Platform to Collect Payment

For a smooth and professional transaction, it's best to have a system in place for collecting payments from virtual clients. The most essential aspect is to use a secure platform to collect and store client's billing information. When building your nutrition practice, using an all-in-one practice management platform for billing, scheduling and charting can save your practice both time and money.

✨ For Healthie members: Healthie's payment processor is certified as Payment Card Industry (PCI) Service Provider Level 1, the highest possible level.

👉 Step 6. Have Virtual Clients Sign a Telehealth Consent Form

Having the right office forms and policies in place is an integral part of your nutrition business. Depending on your state, receiving a telehealth informed consent form may be required for your profession (regulations vary by profession, depending on state regulations). In states without strict regulation for dietitians, nutritionists or other wellness professionals, clients may legally only need to provide their verbal consent for telehealth care.

While getting a patient's consent for telehealth visits may not be a requirement in your state, you may still want to consider having your client's fill out a telehealth informed consent form regardless of the regulations. It's also best practice to document in every session note that your client verbally agreed to conduct the session using telehealth.

The American Telemedicine Association published practice guidelines for telehealth care. Within this guide, there are several suggestions on what to provide within a Telehealth consent form, including:

- Inform patients of their rights when receiving telemedicine, including the right to suspend or refuse treatment
- Inform patients of their own responsibilities when participating in telemedicine
- Discuss the potential benefits, constraints, and risks (e.g., privacy and security) of telemedicine
- You may want to outline some of your basic telemedicine program policies around billing, scheduling, cancellation etc
- Disclose to patients of technology or equipment failures during service sessions and contingency plans in case of technical failure

See a sample Telehealth Consent form below, but be sure to have legal consult review it, and make adjustments based on your business legal needs. You'll want to tailor this form to meet your state telehealth requirements, explain your business telehealth policies and speak to the technology you choose to use to conduct your telehealth services.

✨ For Healthie members: a Telehealth Consent form is conveniently included in your forms library for you to edit and include in your new client paperwork.

👉 Looking for more resources on telehealth services?



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Telehealth Informed Consent Form

I, _____ (patient name) understand that my healthcare provider _____ (dietitian's name) wishes me to have a telehealth consultation.

This means that through interactive video connection, I will be able to consult with the above named dietitian about my health concerns. My dietitian has explained to me how telehealth will be used to do such a consultation and how else we will use telehealth to connect while working together, using the Healthie telehealth platform. Telehealth through Healthie includes: video appointments, virtual food diary review, messaging directly with my dietitian and sharing forms and documents on Healthie.

I understand there are potential risks with this technology:

1. The video connection may not work or that it may stop working during the consultation.
2. The video picture or information transmitted may not be clear enough to be useful for the consultation.

The benefits of a telehealth consultation are:

1. I do not need to travel to the consult location.
2. I have access to a specialist through this consultation.

I also understand other individuals may need the Healthie telehealth platform and that they will take reasonable steps to maintain confidentiality of the information obtained. I have read this document and understand the risks and benefits of the telehealth consultation and have had my questions regarding the procedure explained and I hereby consent to participate in a telehealth visit under the conditions described in this document.

Patient Signature: _____

Date: