



Health Center Oral Health Program Promising Practice

November 2022

Using Teledentistry to Improve Prenatal Care

Organization: University of California, Irvine, Family Health Center

Summary:

A teledentistry program at University of California, Irvine (UCI) Family Health Center in Santa Ana, California, provides primarily synchronous services to pregnant patients.

Previously, the dentist managing the dental program noticed that pregnant people were not scheduling dental appointments at the health center, which meant that they were not receiving dental care. Typically, patients are referred to the dental clinic from the high-risk obstetrics clinic due to gestational diabetes and may have other conditions like preeclampsia or other chronic conditions. As a potential solution, the dentist created a teledentistry plan tailored to meet the needs of patients who are pregnant.

As soon as UCI began offering telehealth appointments for other services, the dentist adapted the existing infrastructure and technology for teledentistry. The initial purpose of the program was to triage patients to the appropriate level of dental services. To begin the teledentistry program, the dentist worked closely with IT staff to get the appropriate telehealth dental codes entered into the billing system. Pregnant patients who are receiving care at UCI are referred to the dentist by the Nurse Practitioners (NP) in the OBGYN department. The NP will enter an internal referral through EPIC. Depending on the urgency of the referral, the NP may also send an internal message in EPIC to the dental team to describe the referral. Then, the front desk staff and/or dental assistants contact the perinatal patients to schedule a teledentistry appointment. At that time, the patient is encouraged to sign up for EPIC MyChart if they do not already have an account. Training the OBGYN on using the EPIC referrals for dental was simple because they were already using EPIC referrals for other departments.

On the day of the teledentistry appointment, patients receive a reminder call that morning from the dentist. UCI found that patients are more likely to attend their teledentistry visit if the reminder call was from the dentist. Patients also receive a phone call if the dentist is running behind schedule. During the teledentistry visit, the dentist discusses medical and dental histories, any dental issues and gives oral hygiene instructions, sets goals and answers any questions the patient has. The dentist uses the initial teledentistry visit as a tool to build trust with the patients.

If an in-person visit is required, the patient's next appointment is scheduled at the end of the teledentistry visit. Because many of the patients have not been to the dentist in a long time, patients often need radiographs and dental treatment. UCI discovered that patients are more

likely to attend their dental appointments after they have had a teledentistry visit, thus helping with patient retention.

So far, UCI's teledentistry for prenatal care is the first program of this kind among community clinics in the county. From March 2021 to September 2022, the dentist has seen 121 prenatal patients via teledentistry with a 4% no-show rate for prenatal teledentistry appointments. Patients reportedly feel more confident and less stressed about their dental appointments. They are also more willing to speak frankly with the provider from the comfort and security of their own homes.

When considering a teledentistry program, UCI recommends building a strong and cohesive team, passionate about teledentistry. Additionally, it is important to educate staff members, so they understand program goals and outcomes. This increases staff comfort and enthusiasm for the new process. It is also important to coordinate with and train staff how to explain the new technology. Teledentistry is an opportunity to build trust with patients. Patients often assume they need to be seen in person to receive care and are unaware of the services they can receive virtually. Many patients are surprised at how much can be done via teledentistry and appreciate providers taking the time to explain what their insurance covers for them as well. If in-person or follow-up appointments need to be made, these are scheduled at the end of the teledentistry visit for the following week. This has greatly increased the likelihood of kept clinic appointments.

UCI Family Health Center plans to continue this innovative approach beyond the context of the pandemic and has plans to expand as well. In addition to improving dental care for pregnant people, the dental team aims to use teledentistry to reach patients with diabetes, particularly those with high A1c levels.

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