

An Update on the Use of Virtual Care by Family Physicians During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Newfoundland and Labrador

Objective

To examine the extent of virtual care use by family physicians (FPs) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL).

Practice Points

1. There was a massive increase in virtual communication (video or telephone) between patients and fee-for-service physicians during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, phone and telemedicine calls by FPs stabilized at 51% of billings.
2. In the time period analyzed, 98% of virtual care was completed by telephone.

Data

1. Data were obtained from the NL Centre for Health Information (now NL Health Services-Digital Health). Data during the COVID-19 pandemic from 16 Mar 2020–21 Aug 2022 (137 weeks) was compared to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period of 6 Jan–15 Mar 2020 (10 weeks).
2. Blocks of weeks used to summarize data during the COVID-19 pandemic were 16 Mar–28 Jun 2020 (15 weeks), 29 Jun–27 Sep 2020 (13 weeks), and 28 Sep 2020–4 Jan 2021 (14 weeks). These blocks were then balanced into 13 week blocks to represent fiscal quarters more evenly.

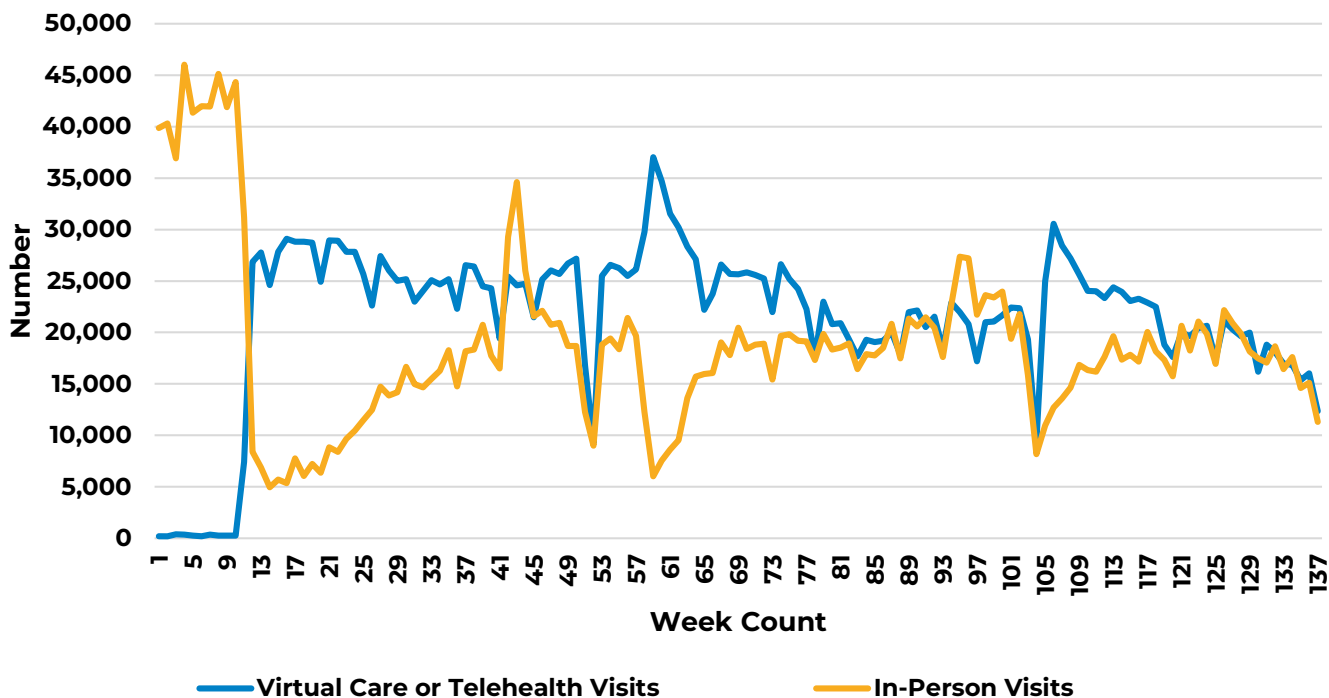


Figure 1. In-Person Visits vs Virtual Care/Telehealth by Week for FPs in NL, 6 Jan 2020–21 Aug 2022

Results

- During week 11 (18 Mar 2020), NL underwent lockdown for a Public Health State of Emergency.
- During week 59 (12 Feb 2021), all of NL went to Alert Level 5 as the Alpha variant was identified.
- During week 105 (4 Jan 2022), all of NL went to Modified Alert Level 4.
- The decline seen in both in-person and virtual care visits during the same week corresponds with the week of Christmas.
- Total visit change and in-person visits are compared to the first 10 week average of 2020 (6 Jan–15 Mar 2020).

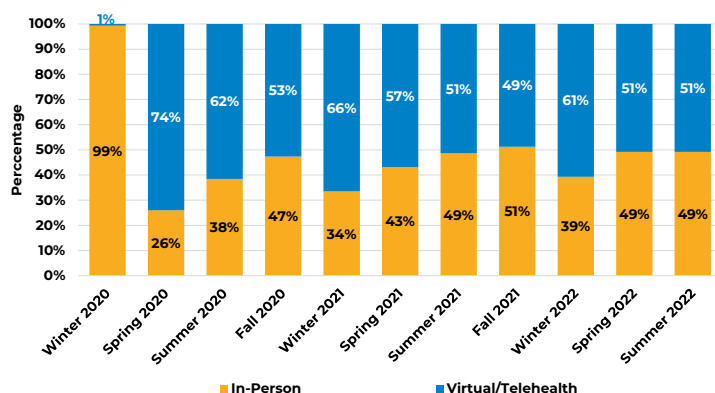


Figure 2. Virtual Care/Telehealth vs In-Person Visits Ratio by Quarters in NL, Winter 2020–Summer 2022

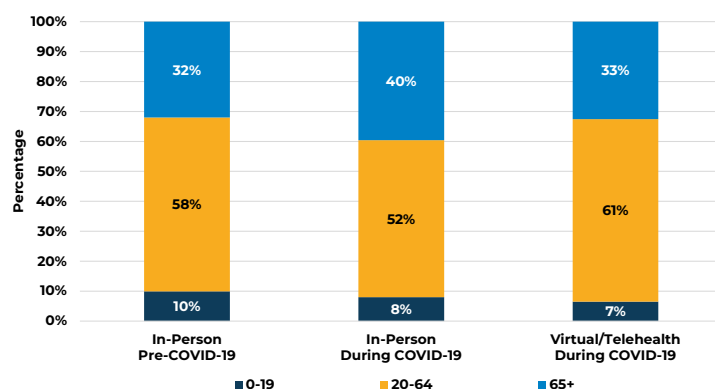


Figure 3. Age Breakdown of Virtual Care/Telehealth vs In-Person Care, 6 Jan 2020–21 Aug 2022

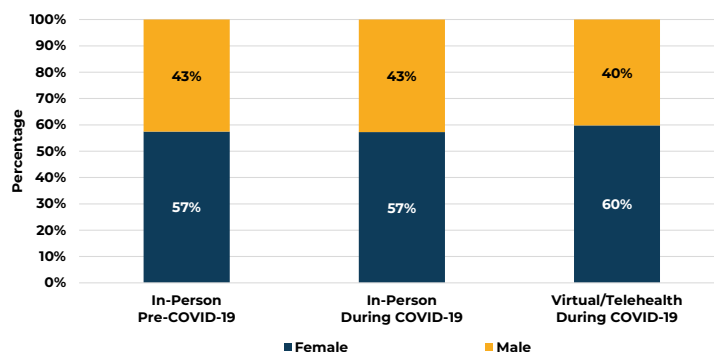


Figure 4. Breakdown of Virtual Care/Telehealth vs In-Person Care by Sex, 6 Jan 2020–21 Aug 2022

Conclusions

1. A large and sustained reduction of in-person visits to FPs occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. These visits were replaced by virtual visits, which leveled off at 50% of all visits.
2. When comparing the age distribution for virtual and in-person appointments during the COVID-19, pandemic more seniors attended in-person appointments, while more 20–64 year olds attended virtual appointments. 98% of virtual care was completed via phone. As the health information systems upgrade, technologies such as video calls, secure patient-to-physician messaging, and virtual consults should become more prevalent.