

E-Consults

Lessons Learned from the Access to Specialty Care Engagement Network (ASCENT) Cohort



What Are E-Consults?

E-consults—digital communication between a general health care professional and a specialist—have increasingly emerged as an important tool for addressing Colorado’s specialty care access gaps. This option is especially promising for uninsured Coloradans or those with limited insurance coverage as it eliminates issues such as appointment availability constraints and transportation concerns, which sometimes arise when patients are referred from one provider to another for specialty care face-to-face visits.



E-consults offer potential savings to patients and the health care system

In addition to the potential e-consults have to address unmet patient needs, numerous studies also demonstrate significant associated financial savings. Patients can receive specialty care without the hassle and added cost of arranging transportation or child care. The faster turnaround time associated with e-consults also provides patients, particularly those in rural areas, with more immediate care when needed.

In addition to the savings and benefits for patients, e-consults pose a substantial opportunity to reduce costs to the system overall. A 2018 retrospective analysis of e-consults’ potential financial impact among patients at a Connecticut-based federally qualified health center (FQHC) found an average \$84 per patient

per month savings for patients who had an e-consult instead of being sent directly for a face-to-face visit, accounting for an annualized Medicaid savings of close to \$600,000.¹

Patients receiving more care through e-consults may also be less likely to seek out care in the emergency room setting. The 2019 Colorado Health Access Survey found nearly 60% of uninsured patients and over 53% of Health First Colorado members visited the emergency room because they were unable to get an appointment at the doctor’s office or clinic as soon as was necessary. Given the high cost of emergency room visits, access to e-consults could support patients in getting necessary care quicker and potentially save the system millions of dollars.²

Key Takeaways

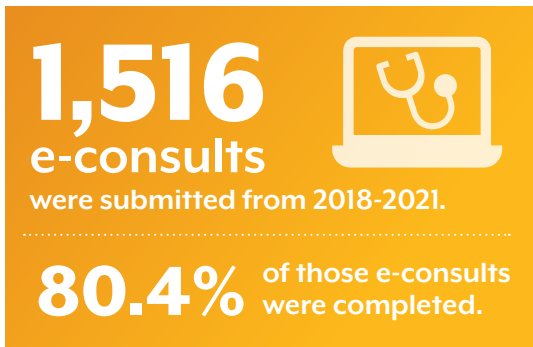
- E-consults hold promise for Colorado as ASCENT has clearly demonstrated with significant decreases in wait times that have resulted in patients getting needed care more quickly.
- The virtual and more immediate nature of e-consults provides care to populations that have a particularly difficult time accessing specialty care, such as patients who are living in rural and mountain regions as well as those more likely to center their sites of care in the safety net clinic.
- While e-consults have proven to be valuable, employing them at a wider scale will require intentional and strategic thinking around implementation efforts that reduce workflow disruptions and reimbursement structures that support patients and providers alike.

ASCENT E-Consult Pilot Program

Beginning in the second year of the ASCENT program, cohort members piloted a process for communication and referrals across organizations, service areas, and systems by utilizing e-consults. KPCO funded the expansion of its e-consult platform, managed by the third-party vendor NetChemistry, to include cohort members. NetChemistry provided trainings and onboarding for each of the participating sites.

How did the ASCENT cohort leverage e-consults to increase access to specialty care for uninsured Coloradans and Health First Colorado members?

During the ASCENT engagement between 2018 and 2021, cohort members submitted 1,516 total e-consults across three sites. In addition to increasing the portion of e-consults completed, the ASCENT cohort also significantly decreased the amount of time patients had to wait for care. For example, compared to baseline when 74.3% of e-consults were completed within five days, 81.9% of e-consults were completed within five days as of January 2021.

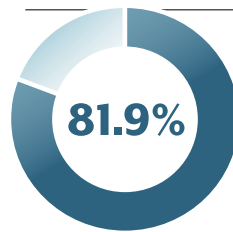


Specialties requested and provider network growth

Top five specialties receiving e-consults, 2018-2021:

- Gastroenterology
- Ophthalmology
- Endocrinology
- Dermatology
- Neurology

Three sites and 17 unique specialties utilized e-consults by 2021, an increase from 12 specialties when the e-consult pilot began.



Changes in wait times and patient impact

of e-consults completed within five days by January 2021, representing a nearly 8 percentage point increase from baseline.

Of the 1,219 total successful e-consults from 2018-2021

- 98.6%** were completed for uninsured patients
- 65.5%** were completed for adults between ages of 39-64
- 24.0%** were completed for adults between ages of 18-38
- 38.1%** were gastroenterology e-consults

Lessons Learned: How to increase e-consult adoption in Colorado

Increasing e-consult adoption in Colorado will require engagement from multiple actors.

- 1. Policymakers should explore what models exist for reimbursing e-consults as well as identify what additional supports are needed to equip clinics across the state to use e-consults, such as broadband internet.*
- 2. Specialty care and primary care providers should integrate e-consult platforms into the existing processes to reduce disruptions to clinical workflow.*
- 3. Clinics should identify primary care and specialty care provider champions who will regularly use e-consults and encourage others to do as well.*

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¹Anderson, D., Villagra, VG., Coman, E., Ahmed, T., Porto, A., Jepeal, N., Maci., G., & Teevan, B. (2018). "Reduced Cost of Specialty Care Using Electronic Consultations For Medicaid Patients." Health Affairs 37(12).

²"18 Million Avoidable Hospital Emergency Department Visits Add \$32 Billion in Costs to the Health Care System Each Year." (2019). UnitedHealth Group. Retrieved from <https://www.unitedhealthgroup.com/viewer.html?file=/content/dam/UHG/PDF/2019/UHG-Avoidable-ED-Visits.pdf>. April 2021.