



Guidelines

AMERICAN ANIMAL HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION

Telehealth

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TOOLKIT



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Resources for veterinary teams

aaha.org/telehealth

Read the
Guidelines



Listen to
the podcast



Download
the tools





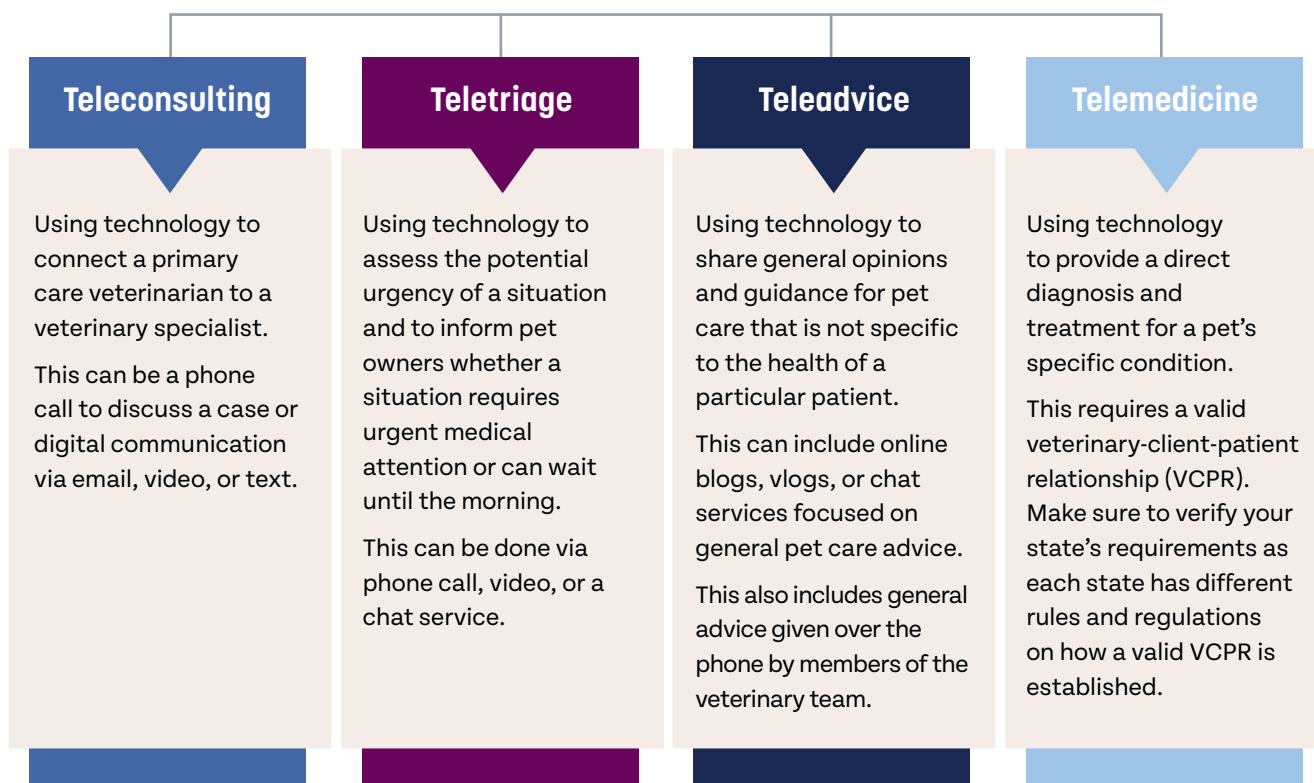
Telehealth at a glance

What is telehealth?

Think of telehealth as the umbrella term for the different forms of digital veterinary care.

Telehealth

Using any type of technology to provide medical care, knowledge, or education for a patient that is not directly in front of you.





Why telehealth matters


Telehealth can alleviate many of the blockers that inhibit access to care.

Limited access to care is driven by a variety of factors, including:

-  Access to transportation
-  Physical distance
-  Finances
-  Language
-  Hours of operation
-  Limited education
-  Shortage of staff

Veterinary staffing shortages in 2024:

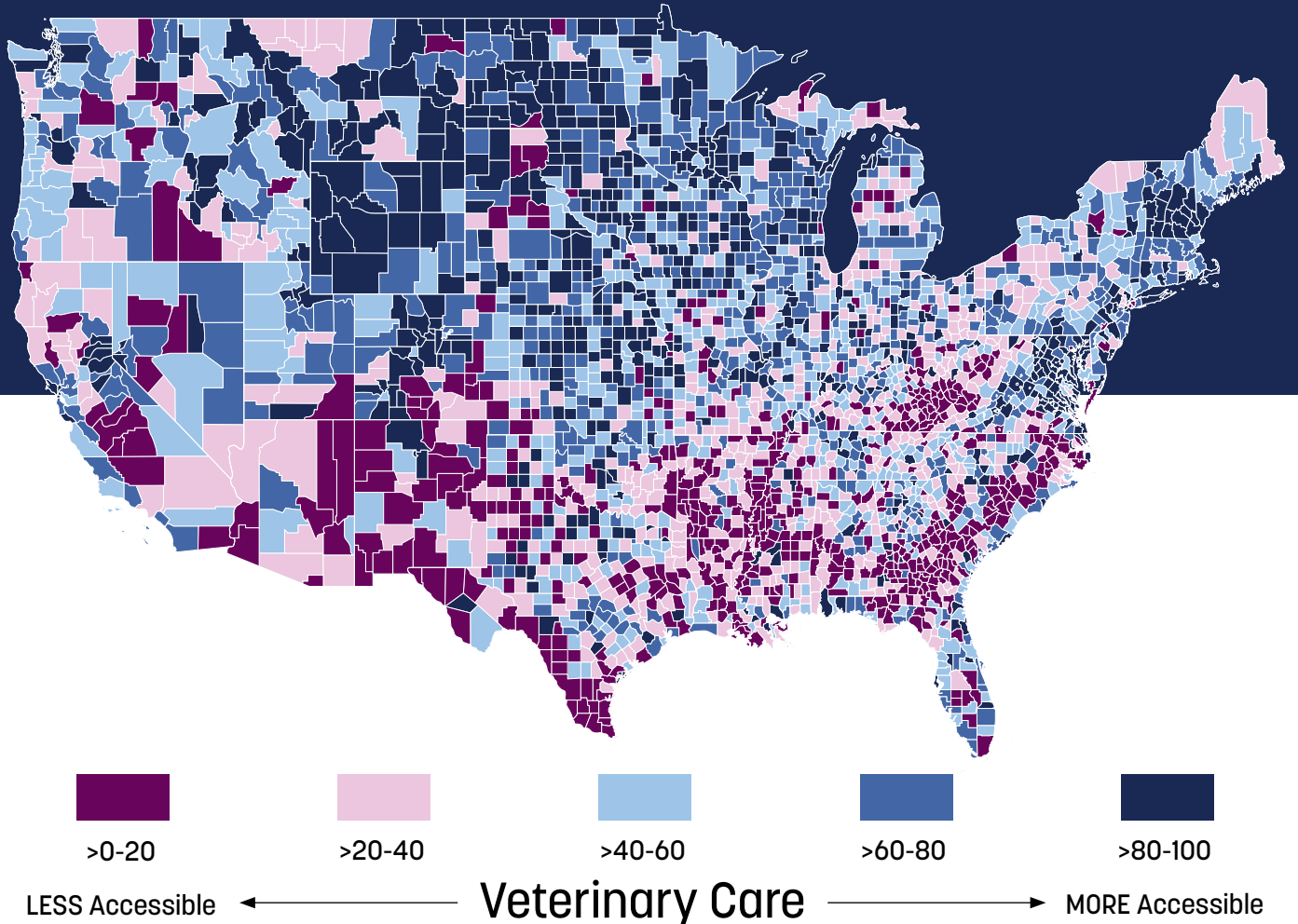

12K
Veterinarians


48K
Support staff


694
US counties with no
veterinary employees


25.2M
companion animals
in underserved areas

VCAP Veterinary Care Accessibility Score (VCAS) Map



Source: Veterinary Care Accessibility Project, www.accesstovetcare.org/vcas-map

This map from the VCAP 2024 report aggregates the factors limiting access to care to visually depict the areas that are currently underserved.

Accessibility is only one factor impacting the ever-increasing need to offer virtual care. As technology continues to change the scope of

our day-to-day lives, there is also a noticeable shift in how pet owners approach their pet's care. With pet technology ranging from activity tracker and video monitoring apps to medical care text reminders, we are in the age of the digital pet.

Pet owners want access to pet care wherever they are, whenever

they need it—but that's not always possible to accomplish from an exam room. Providing telehealth options shows dedication to offering services where and how clients want to receive them, which encourages pet owners to take an active role in their pet's health and enhances your clients' trust in you.

Telehealth at your practice

Telehealth should be viewed as an extension of services you already offer to clients for their pets.

It can be used:

- ✓ To supplement in-clinic visits
- ✓ To provide a standalone, situation-dependent service
- ✓ To address access to care issues

Telehealth is a tool in our arsenal that can be implemented to improve access to veterinary care. We can help positively impact patient outcomes by virtually meeting people and their pets where they are.

You might already practice some form of telehealth...

If a pet owner calls about a pet who has a proptosed eye and your credentialed veterinary technician (CrVT) triages the situation over the phone to ensure they go to the best location for assistance.

That's teletriage.

If a pet owner calls about a litter of puppies and your CrVT discusses litter health, preventative care, and feeding schedules.

That's teleadvice.

If a pet owner calls about a stressed cat due to their newly adopted dog and your CrVT educates them on introducing the pets, possible home modifications, creating a safe space, and stocking up on Feliway.

That's teleadvice.

Make it telehealth!



After hours support



Emergency triage



Post-surgical follow-ups



Post-visit rechecks



Post-ER visit follow-ups



Chronic care rechecks
(that don't require lab work or a physical exam)

What qualifies as a telehealth visit depends on a variety of factors and, ultimately, is up to the discretion of the care provider.

Ready to commit to telehealth but don't know where to start?

Keep reading for our comprehensive guide on kickstarting telehealth at your practice.

DID YOU KNOW



Triage consults are educational in nature and provide decision-making support for when to seek in-person care.

Chewy's teletriage service, Connect with a Vet, provides 65% of pet owners with the recommendation to see their veterinary team within 1-3 days of their teletriage consult.



POV: pet families

Telehealth gives veterinary teams the opportunity to offer pet owners a more comfortable way to manage their pet's care.

Pet owners can...

Speak to a veterinary professional to discuss new or changing behavioral symptoms.

Connect with veterinary professionals more efficiently in circumstances when there are long wait times or no availability.

Be better prepared for the cost of care by having discussions ahead of a visit.

Use telehealth appointments to review estimates, discuss treatment option costs, and set financial expectations for clients prior to their next in-person visit.

Veterinary teams can...

Recommend next steps which may include continued monitoring at home or coming in for an in-person examination.

Answer questions in real time and help pet owners determine the best next step in their pet's care

Provide care that might have previously been inaccessible due to disability, transportation limitations, or geographical location.

Help pet owners know what to expect from the comfort of their own home and so that they feel more prepared for and confident about the care their pet needs.

Benefits of telehealth appointments

Alleviating stress and anxiety	
Pet owners	Pets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Encourages quality time in a supportive environment which can strengthen the bond between the pet owner and pet. ✓ Offers veterinary professionals the opportunity to observe the pet's behavior and clinical signs in a home environment which could reveal new signs that might otherwise be masked by the stress and anxiety many pets experience in the clinic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Alleviates significant stress and anxiety pets can experience traveling to a veterinary practice. ✓ Removes the stress and anxiety pets can experience in crowded and noisy veterinary practices. ✓ Reduces the risk of exposure to infectious diseases by avoiding interaction with other animals at the veterinary practice. This can be beneficial for immunocompromised or geriatric pets and pets with a communicable illness. ✓ Offers a more positive experience since pets remain in the comfort of their own home.
More education	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Access to an array of educational resources written or reviewed by a veterinary professional (rather than relying on Google searches). Telehealth platforms prioritize providing resources tailored to the pet owners' needs, including articles, videos, and infographics. ✓ Allow veterinary professionals to visually demonstrate techniques and use visual aids like infographics or videos to teach pet owners how to do at-home exams, administer medications, or provide basic first aid. 	
Better informed on care	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Access to virtual consultations with veterinary specialists who can provide recommendations, diagnostic interpretations, and a customized treatment plan. Pet owners can receive a more comprehensive educational experience on complex medical conditions and guidance on advanced treatment options ✓ Offers pet owners a comfortable environment to have financial conversations. Veterinary teams can provide financial counseling and guidance on financial assistance programs, pet insurance, or shared community resources in a more private setting. 	
Supported decision making	
Pet owners	Pets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Encourages collaborative decision making between veterinary teams and pet owners to provide a better understanding of the pet's health status and management. ✓ Empowers pet owners to actively participate in their pet's healthcare journey by giving them the time and space to ask any questions and discuss treatment options, potential risks, and the prognosis. With a better understanding of the rationale behind recommendations, pet owners can feel more confident making informed decisions about their pet's health. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Offers the opportunity for remote monitoring through virtual check-ins regarding the pet's health (i.e., activity level, appetite, vital signs, or medication routine). With real-time feedback, pet owners can gain insight into their pet's progress and need for ongoing care.

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Benefits of telehealth appointments

(Continued from previous page)

Increased access to care	
Pet owners	Pets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ May reduce the need to physically travel to consult a veterinary professional. This can be beneficial for pet owners who live in rural or remote areas with limited access to veterinary care. ✓ Can broaden access to specialist care through teleconsultation. ✓ Provides timely access to veterinary consultations which can help reduce delays caused by scheduling conflicts, no availability, or long wait times. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Provides pets with quicker access to veterinary triage and recommendations. ✓ Offers the opportunity for after-hour support in case of urgent or emergency situations. ✓ Ensures comprehensive and consistent care through regular follow-ups, monitoring, and adjustments to treatment plans resulting in improved outcomes overtime.
Improved wellness	
Pet owners	Pets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Allows for veterinary consultations as soon as pet owners notice a behavior change or new clinical signs in their pet. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Encourages early detection of health issues to prevent the progression of a disease and improve treatment outcomes.



How do pet owners feel about telehealth?

Offering telehealth services means meeting your existing (and future) clients where they're at. Don't believe us? Let's look at the numbers.



93.7%
of pet owners¹

are highly satisfied with their virtual interactions and rate their experience a 5 out of 5.



91.9%
of pet owners²

with a primary care veterinarian would use alternative methods of communication, if provided.

86.8%
of pet owners²

felt they were better able to communicate with their primary care veterinarian about the situation after a telemedicine consultation.



89.3%
of pet owners²

felt they were better informed about their pet's situation after a telemedicine consultation.



**Phone, chat,
and video¹**

were highly preferred for pet owners over email or other asynchronous connections.



**Over 60% of
pet owners¹**

reported resolution of the issue after a telehealth visit.

Why are pet owners relying on telehealth services?³

Instant, digital access to medical care encourages pet owners to have a greater knowledge base and a proactive approach to their pet's health.

Top reasons for telehealth consults:



Behavioral changes



Skin issues



Nutrition



Gastrointestinal issues



Urgent/emergency

1. VVCA, vvca.org

2. National Library of Medicine, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31837750

3. Chewy Health, www.chewy.com/health; VVCA 2024 Report, vvca.org

So, you want to offer telehealth

What are your options?

Veterinary practices can choose to partner with an established vendor for provision of services or technology platform OR they can choose to offer their own telehealth services.

Leveraging third-party services

Referring to another service after hours offers flexibility such as:

- ▶ Making money for your practice
- ▶ Increasing availability outside practice hours
- ▶ Reducing burden on other local practices/ERs
- ▶ Eliminating the need for additional IT support and technology troubleshooting (it's on the vendor)

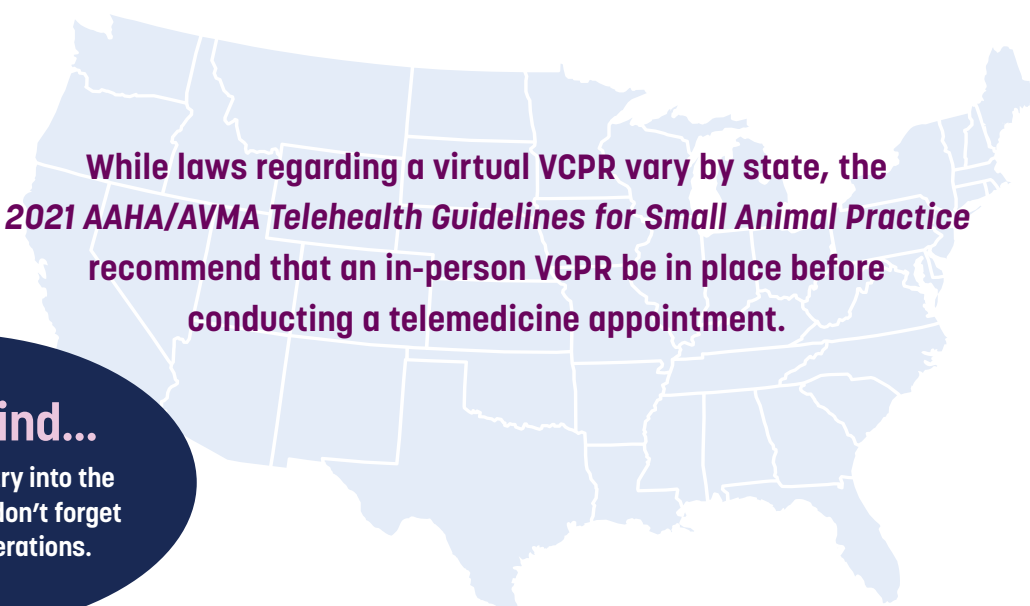
Starting your own service

Responsibilities include:

- ▶ Workflows
- ▶ Marketing/client communications
- ▶ Facilities
- ▶ Team structure
- ▶ Payment
- ▶ Training

Telehealth and its various components may be defined differently depending on the state.

Laws relating to veterinary telemedicine vary depending on the state. Review your state's Veterinary Practice Act to ensure you're compliant. Many states are in the process of reviewing their Veterinary Practice Act. Check back regularly to make sure you're aware of any changes.



While laws regarding a virtual VCPR vary by state, the 2021 AAHA/AVMA Telehealth Guidelines for Small Animal Practice recommend that an in-person VCPR be in place before conducting a telemedicine appointment.

Keep in mind...

As you plan your entry into the world of telehealth, don't forget regulatory considerations.

Telemedicine continues to be an evolving field. However, certain standards hold true nationwide:

- ▶ Veterinary professionals who practice virtually are held to the same standard of practice as those who practice in person.
- ▶ It is up to the veterinary professional's judgement to decide if telemedicine aligns with the standards of care.
- ▶ Generally, telemedicine is only permitted if the veterinarian is licensed in the state in which the pet is located.
- ▶ Telemedicine cannot include prescribing controlled substances without a traditionally established in-person VCPR.
- ▶ Telemedicine must be documented as thoroughly as an in-person consultation.



Your guide to starting your own telehealth service

Step 1: Decide on your telehealth offering

Service type + delivery method = your telehealth offering

There are a variety of options and service models available to facilitate telehealth visits including teleadvice, teletriage, teleconsulting, and telemedicine. Your approach will vary depending on your practice’s chosen scope and intent.

Step 2: Set up your tools and space

<p>Facilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A quiet space free of audio interference. • A fast and reliable Internet connection (such as Wi-Fi). • A blank wall or a professional digital background for a neutral and consistent video conference setup.
<p>Technology</p>	<p>Your tech setup (hardware and software) depends on the services you want to provide.</p> <p>Video and audio:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video conferencing software like Zoom <p>Text-based communications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email • Chat platforms • Synchronous or real-time texting • Veterinary communications apps that offer communication and information-sharing features <p>If we’re stripping it down to the basics, all you need for a teletriage or teleadvice service is your PIMS and a phone. As you build a more comprehensive set-up, your platforms and devices will evolve as well.</p> <p>A more sophisticated setup would require investing in a commercially available telehealth service that will integrate with your PIMS. This set up may require more of an investment, but it also streamlines the entire process so your team can access patient information, potential resources, scheduling, and your patient’s EMR.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Continued on next page)</i></p>

Workflows	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Continued from previous page)</i></p> <p>Your workflows will depend on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What services you plan to offer • Your state regulations • Team-issued guardrails (i.e. what can and can't be prescribed through a telemedicine visit?) <p>Consult the experts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital communications training • Technology training (how to set up a video conference, how to use chat software, etc.) <p><i>Remember that your team will learn best by doing. So, get trained, create guidelines, and then dive in headfirst. Your workflows will develop as you go.</i></p>
Comms	<p>The most important part of providing a telehealth service—making sure your clients know it exists. Come up with a marketing/communications plan to promote telehealth services at your practice. Client communications extend beyond just service promotion. Don't forget essential content, such as reminders, follow-up emails, and chat templates.</p> <p>If marketing and communication isn't your forte, there are many veterinary communication firms that can help your team develop and execute a telehealth communications strategy.</p>

Keep in mind...

- ▶ 80% of telehealth visits occur through mobile devices. So, when you're choosing your technology setup, consider prioritizing mobile compatibility.
- ▶ 98% of consults receive educational materials from reputable resources such as PetMD. When building your communications strategy, ensure your team has easy access to educational material to include in follow-up communication.

Step 3: Assemble your team

Your virtual team might look a little different depending on what telehealth service you choose to provide.

Teletriage & teleadvice	Services provided by veterinary professionals; licensed veterinarians, credentialed or non-credentialed veterinary technicians, veterinary assistants, and/or customer service representatives.
Telemedicine	Services provided by licensed veterinarians who are compliant with state regulatory guidance.
Teleconsulting	Services provided by licensed veterinarians who are board certified veterinary specialists providing specialty consultations to GP veterinarians.

Keep in mind...

- How will you pay your virtual team?
- How will you charge for your telehealth services?
- How will you market your telehealth services?
- How will you receive and implement feedback for your services?
- Does your virtual team only have telehealth responsibilities, or will they serve a hybrid role, virtually and in clinic?
- Virtual care requires specific training regarding proper communication in a digital environment, such as
 - Limitations training for teleadvice and teletriage
 - Technology systems training for all forms of telehealth



Roles and responsibilities

Customer service representatives (CSRs) or veterinary assistants



- ▶ Understand the reason or cause for concern.
- ▶ Book appointments for clinic or telemedicine visits.
- ▶ Transfer to a dedicated veterinary technician for triage and teleadvice.

Veterinary technicians (credentialed, licensed, registered)



- ▶ Perform triage consultations.
- ▶ Provide education and general advice broadly applicable to most animals in a particular situation.
- ▶ Direct pet owners in the right direction, whether a telemedicine, in-person exam, or an ER visit.
- ▶ **Cannot** diagnose, prescribe, treat, or provide a treatment plan.
- ▶ **Can** take medical history for a telemedicine appointment prior to looping in a veterinarian.

Veterinarians



- ▶ Decide whether telemedicine is appropriate based on the patient and situation.
- ▶ Conduct telemedicine visits, putting the patient's safety and wellbeing first.
- ▶ Adhere to the general accepted standards of veterinary practice and state regulatory guidance.
- ▶ Keep proper written medical records to document the interaction, diagnosis, treatments, and plan.
- ▶ Provide education and guidance along with instructions for follow-up care and monitoring.

Telehealth lite

Branching into telehealth seem daunting? Start small! These ideas offer a phased approach to telehealth so you can give telehealth a whirl without overwhelming your team.

Teleadvice

With teleadvice, the team can start with the basics as you and your team get comfortable with your telehealth program.

- ▶ Have a technology savvy employee? Utilize your in-house resources to start a vlog or blog on healthcare topics relevant to your area or type of practice!
- ▶ Start with an email or text follow-up program and then branch out into other avenues as you see the success of your telehealth program.

Teletriage

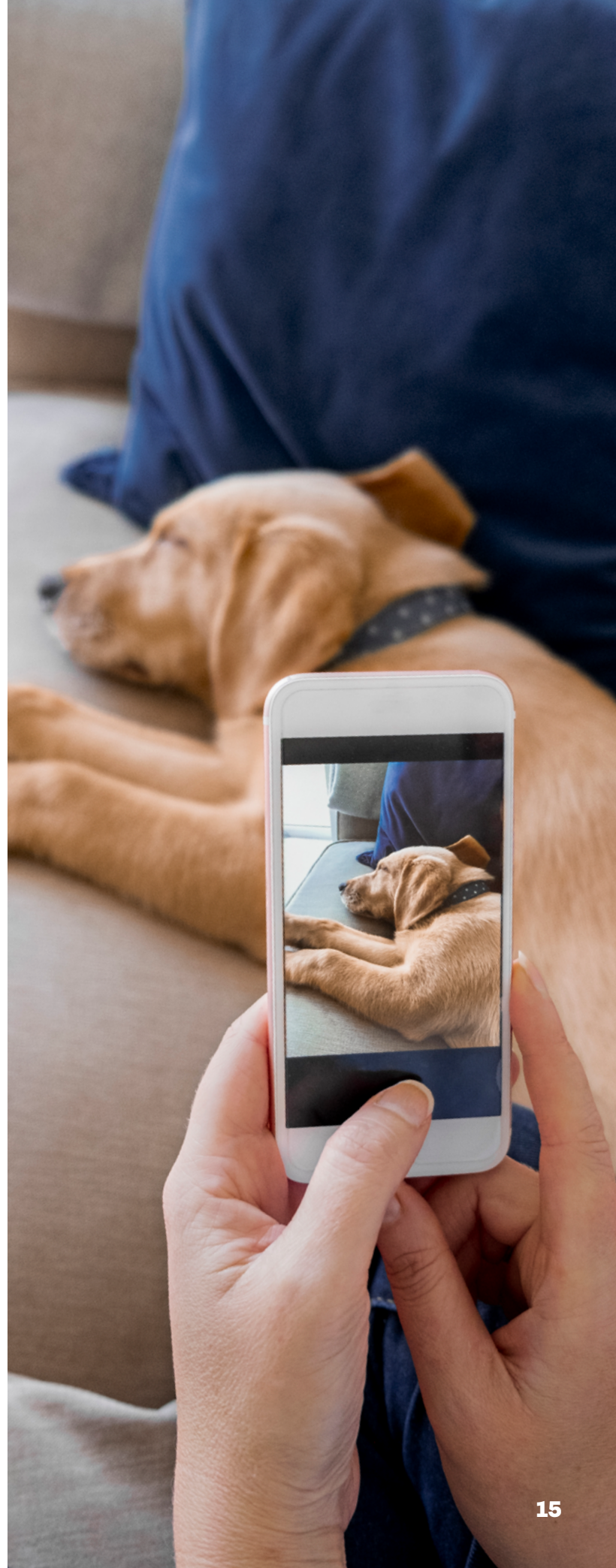
Ready for more? Add on teletriage to offer general advice and guidance for your clients without committing to telemedicine.

- ▶ If technology is one of the things that's holding you back, start with an easy platform like Zoom.
- ▶ You can always advance to telehealth-specific platforms. These might seem overwhelming, but they can often integrate with your PIMS which creates a much more streamlined process for your team and for your clients.

Telemedicine

Ready to take things to the next level? Before committing to telemedicine, make sure to check your state's regulations to ensure that your business model is compliant with any regulations regarding telemedicine in your state.

- ▶ Check which systems integrate with your PIMS platform.
 - ▶ Start implementing online scheduling with recheck appointments.
-



Recap

- ▶ Provide a review of the benefits to the veterinary team, patients, and pet owners on the usage of telehealth services.
- ▶ Give the veterinary team talking points for how to communicate the benefits of telehealth for their clients.
- ▶ Every follow up call, check-in text, or educational email you are already sending is part of your clinic's telehealth strategy.
- ▶ Over 90% of pet owners with a primary care veterinarian want telehealth options.
- ▶ Start small by expanding the telehealth strategies you are already implementing.
- ▶ One-size doesn't fit all: ask your clients what they want/need to determine how to support your clientele.
- ▶ Leverage your team so that telehealth isn't a burden to any one group.
- ▶ Many appointments can become a telehealth appointment: Follow-up care, chronic care check-ins, and routine checkups.
- ▶ Telehealth legislation varies by state, so make sure to review your state's Veterinary Practice Act.
- ▶ Charge appropriately for your team's time and expertise.

Resources

How to talk about telehealth

Telehealth can alleviate many of the blockers that inhibit access to care. Think your practice should implement telehealth, but your team is resistant to the idea? Here are some pointers on how to navigate difficult conversations about telehealth.

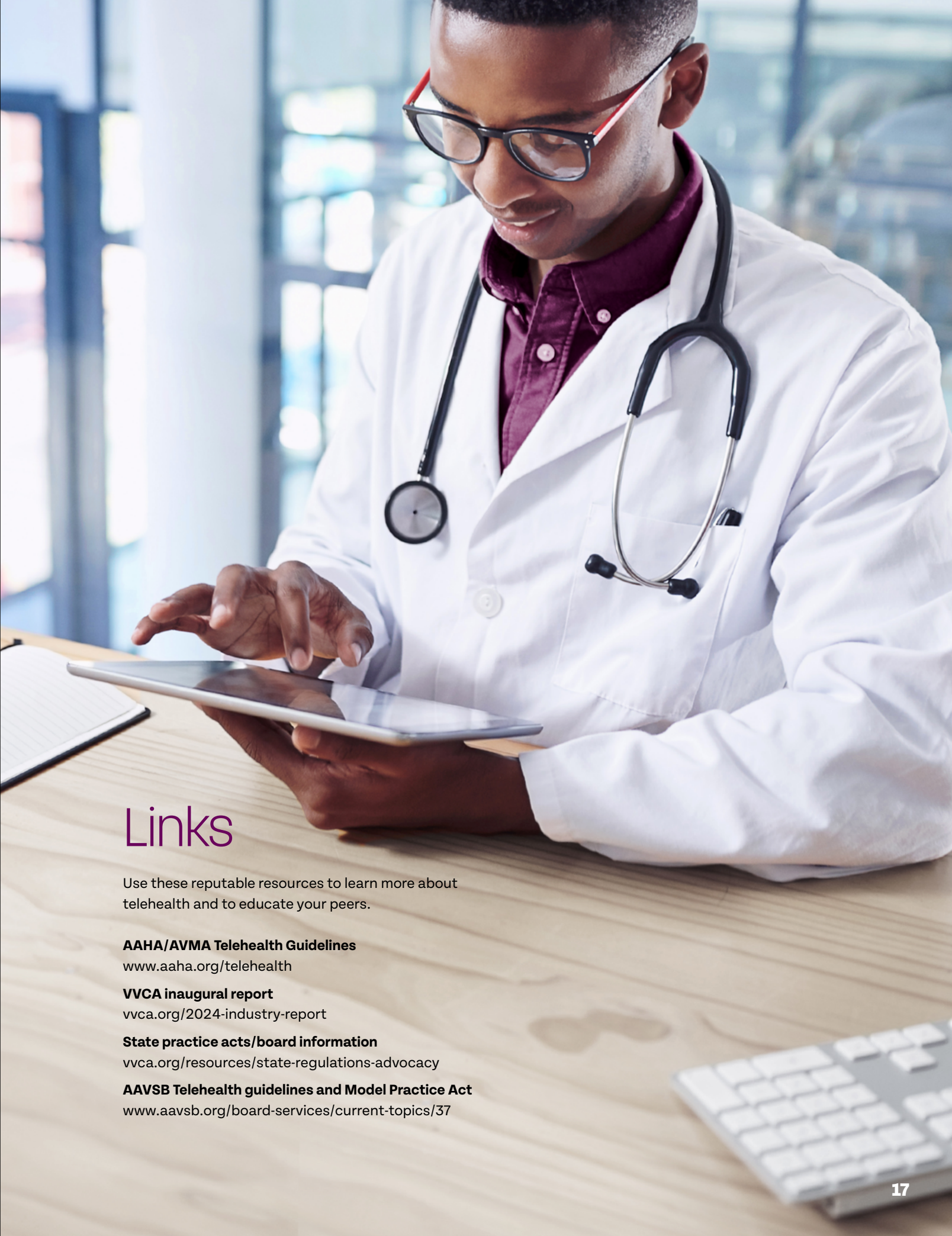
- ▶ Do your research and come prepared with the facts.
- ▶ Make sure to emphasize the value to customers, the practice, and the team (everything you need is in this toolkit!).
- ▶ Have reputable resources at the ready (linked on the next page) to point your team to when they ask follow-up questions.
- ▶ Provide in-clinic examples of which appointments can be re-purposed as telehealth appointments.
- ▶ Advocate for easy-to-use systems (reference the phased approach earlier in this section) to provide your team with a simple action plan.

Prep and practice what you want to say:

“This doesn't have to be scary. We can start simple with Zoom and work our way up to PIMS-integrated platform.”

“Our vet techs are already making ten-minute phone calls to review test results, why not turn that into a 15-minute virtual recheck appointment and make back some revenue?”

“This is something the clients already want. If we want to be a forward-thinking practice, it's important to acknowledge how veterinary medicine is changing and meet clients where they're at with what they want.”



Links

Use these reputable resources to learn more about telehealth and to educate your peers.

AAHA/AVMA Telehealth Guidelines

www.aaha.org/telehealth

VVCA inaugural report

vvca.org/2024-industry-report

State practice acts/board information

vvca.org/resources/state-regulations-advocacy

AAVSB Telehealth guidelines and Model Practice Act

www.aavsb.org/board-services/current-topics/37



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