

Patients' experiences of virtual care

Results from the 2021 survey of NSW public hospital outpatients



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Please note there is the potential for minor revisions of data in this report.
Please check the online version at **bhi.nsw.gov.au** for any amendments or errata.

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The conclusions in this report are those of BHI and no official endorsement by the NSW Minister for Health, the NSW Ministry of Health or any other NSW public health organisation is intended or should be inferred.

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Introduction

Increasing access to digitally enabled healthcare and improving patients' experiences are system-wide priorities for NSW Health.

Virtual care, some elements of which are referred to as telehealth, connects health professionals with patients to deliver care via technologies including telephone and video calls. The use of virtual care has continued to expand in recent years, with this growth accelerating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With funding from the NSW Ministry of Health, the Bureau of Health Information (BHI) first developed the Virtual Care Survey in 2020 to collect information about adult patients' experiences of virtual care outpatient appointments with NSW public hospitals. In 2021, the survey was expanded to include a module of questions about the experiences of those outpatients who also had a virtual care appointment with a general practitioner (GP). These surveys form the basis of a program of work that will help inform improvement in patients' experiences and outcomes of care, and inform the monitoring and evaluation of NSW Health's Virtual Care Strategy.

Working with the NSW Ministry of Health's System Information and Analytics Branch, BHI established that 59,429 adult patients were recorded by NSW public hospitals as receiving a virtual care outpatient appointment by telephone or video call during November or December 2021. A representative sample of these patients (20,363) received an invitation to complete an online questionnaire between March and May 2022. The sample was stratified to ensure sufficient representation of rural and urban populations, older and younger patients and types of virtual care consultations (telephone, video call).

Patients were asked questions about their most recent virtual care appointment and all of their virtual care appointments over the previous 12 months. Patients responding to this survey received virtual care at a time when its use had increased notably during the pandemic. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, particularly during the Delta and Omicron waves, respondents

may not have had the option to choose between in-person and virtual appointments. Information about questionnaire development and analytical methodology is available in the development report and technical supplement for the Virtual Care Survey 2021 at bhi.nsw.gov.au

This report includes:

- Key findings
- Overview of results
- Results for all performance questions and response options, including additional by-group analysis for selected questions. Selected contextual questions (e.g. relating to patient characteristics) are also presented.

Further information about patients' experiences of virtual care in NSW can be found in the results of the Outpatient Cancer Clinics Survey 2021 and Adult Admitted Patient Survey 2021 at bhi.nsw.gov.au

Of the 20,363 people who were invited to complete the questionnaire, 2,816 (14%) – up from 10% in 2020 – provided feedback about their experiences of virtual care with public hospital outpatient clinics. Almost half of respondents (46%) had three or more appointments with a hospital outpatient clinic in 2021.

Of those 2,816 respondents, 1,810 people also provided feedback about their virtual care experiences with a GP. A selection of these GP results are provided from page 13.

Results for all survey questions and response options (for hospital outpatient clinics and GPs) are included in the 'All survey results' section from page 16.

Key findings

When reflecting on their overall experiences of virtual care as an outpatient with a NSW public hospital throughout 2021:



For most questions in the 2021 survey, patients' ratings of their virtual care experiences were the same or relatively stable when compared with 2020.



Around nine in 10 patients (91%) rated their virtual care throughout 2021 as 'very good' or 'good' (unchanged from 2020). More than nine in 10 (95%) said the virtual care they received helped them.



The more virtual care appointments a patient had, the more positive they were likely to be about their overall experiences. Almost half of respondents (46%) had three or more virtual care appointments in the 12 months prior to completing the survey.



Benefits most frequently cited by patients were convenience (73%), saving time (61%), feeling at ease in their own home/surroundings (47%), feeling like they received the right care at the right time (38%), saving money (34%) and not having to take as much time off work (24%).



However, almost one-third of patients (31%) said their virtual care experiences were not as good as in-person appointments (unchanged from 2020). These patients were more likely to have longstanding health conditions, live in urban areas and have had fewer virtual care appointments.

Key findings

When asked to reflect on their most recent virtual care outpatient appointment:



Around nine in 10 patients (92%) said they did not experience problems with the connection or technology during their appointment.

Almost two in 10 (17%) received their virtual care via video call (up from 13% in 2020).



Around nine in 10 patients (93%) said health professionals were 'always' kind and caring (unchanged from 2020). More than nine in 10 (94%) said health professionals 'always' treated them with respect and dignity.



Patients who had seen their health professional(s) before were more likely to rate the virtual care they received as 'very good'.



More than eight in 10 patients said health professionals 'always' explained things in a way they could understand (86%) and 'definitely' listened carefully to their views and concerns (86%).

Almost eight in 10 (77%) said they were 'definitely' involved as much as they wanted to be in decisions about their care and treatment.

Survey respondents who also had at least one virtual care appointment with a GP in the 12 months prior to completing the questionnaire were asked to provide feedback about those experiences.

Almost all of these patients (98%) said virtual care with a GP helped them. Around nine in 10 patients (89%) said the opportunity to use virtual care helped ensure their care was well coordinated between the GP and hospital outpatient clinic.

For more insights into these experiences of virtual care with GPs, go to **page 13**.



Overview of results

Virtual care with public hospital outpatient clinics

Overall experience

Most patients had a positive experience with virtual care

Overall ratings of care reflect general measures of patient satisfaction with virtual care.

When asked to reflect on all of their **experiences of virtual care with a public hospital outpatient clinic throughout 2021**, most patients gave high ratings of care:

91% rated the virtual care they received as 'very good' (64%) or 'good' (27%)

95% said the care and treatment they received during their virtual care appointments helped them 'definitely' (66%) or 'to some extent' (29%)

68% said they would 'speak highly' of their experiences if asked by friends and family (down from 70% in 2020)

The more virtual care appointments a patient had in the 12 months prior to completing the survey, the more positive they were likely to be on each of these overall experience questions. A little under half of respondents (46%) had three or more virtual care appointments with a hospital outpatient clinic in 2021.

Patients who had a video call rated their overall experiences similarly to those who had a telephone appointment.

In general, older patients tended to be slightly less positive about their experiences of virtual care throughout 2021 than younger patients. Older patients were less likely to say their overall care was 'very good', less likely to say their virtual care experiences were better than an in-person appointment and less likely to say that virtual care helped them.

Patients living in rural areas tended to be more positive about their experiences of virtual care than urban patients. Rural patients were more likely to speak highly of virtual care, more likely to say that virtual care helped them and more likely to say they would use virtual care again.

Differences between overall experiences on the basis of age, rurality of the patient's residence, number of virtual care appointments, whether they had seen the health professional(s) before and virtual care type are provided in the 'All survey results' section from page 22.

“

I found virtual care to be safe and comfortable. Less stress than face to face, cost effective and time effective. It was a generally good experience.

”

Overall experience

Some patients were not as positive about their **virtual care experiences with public hospital outpatient clinics throughout 2021**:

- 2%** rated the virtual care they received as 'poor' or 'very poor'
- 4%** would be critical of their experiences if asked by friends and family
- 8%** would not use virtual care again, if given the choice
- 31%** said their virtual care experiences were 'not as good' as in-person appointments (unchanged from 2020)

Patients responded to this survey when the use of virtual care services had increased notably during the pandemic. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, they may or may not have been able to choose between virtual and in-person appointments.

After adjusting for a range of factors, patients with longstanding health conditions were among the most likely to say their virtual care experiences were 'not as good' as in-person appointments. Those least likely to hold this view were rural patients, those who had more virtual care appointments and patients who had seen their health professional(s) before. While older people were less likely to say virtual care was not as good, age was not one of the strongest determinants of this response.*

“
Phone consultations lack the personal face-to-face feel. The doctor/specialist cannot see you and observation is part of a consultation. It has a place, but in my opinion does not replace face-to-face.
”

“
My virtual care experiences have been positive during a difficult time, a pandemic. They allowed me to receive care and guidance with my condition that otherwise would have unavailable to me.
”

*After adjusting for patient characteristics including age, gender, whether they had seen their health professional(s) before, whether they lived in a rural area, the number of virtual care appointments they had within the past 12 months and whether they had a longstanding health condition.

Benefits and challenges

Patients said convenience and time-savings were standout advantages

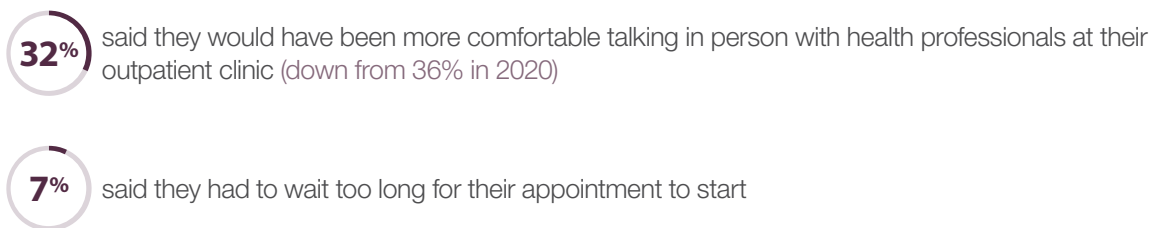
Healthcare professionals have been using technology to deliver care to patients for decades, but this option has more recently become increasingly available, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When asked to reflect on all their **experiences of virtual care with a public hospital outpatient clinic throughout 2021**, patients told us about the range of benefits and challenges they experienced:



Fewer than one in 10 patients (6%) said virtual care offered no benefits.

Patients also told us about the more challenging aspects of virtual care appointments throughout 2021:



Around half of patients (52%) said they experienced no challenges with virtual care throughout 2021.

“
I live in a regional area and have to travel to attend specialist appointments in person. Virtual care has been life changing, as it allows me to save time, money, and avoid having to organise childcare or sick leave.
”

Virtual care environment

Almost all patients said the technology operated effectively

Virtual care offers a distinct experience as compared with in-person appointments. The facilitating technology and patients' freedom to choose where they receive care are key to the experience.

When patients were asked about their **most recent virtual care appointment with an outpatient clinic**:

73% received their virtual care via telephone

17% received their virtual care via video call (up from 13% in 2020)

92% did not experience any problems with the connection or technology during their appointment (down from 94% in 2020)

85% of those who needed it received technical support from staff

“

The instructions for using the technology were clear and the connection good. Overall a very positive experience and it also permitted additional experts to join the video conferencing session.

”

“

The hospital outpatient system has audio and visual, so it is much easier to communicate with the clinician and to have feedback on progress and new exercises and treatments.

”

Timely and coordinated care

Most patients said that virtual care appointments were timely and staff were well prepared

When care is timely and supported by effective coordination among healthcare providers it can help ensure a positive experience for patients throughout their journey of care.

When patients were asked about their **most recent virtual care appointment with an outpatient clinic**:

- 96%** were able to get a suitable appointment time
- 85%** of patients said the health professionals were 'definitely' prepared for the appointment
- 81%** of patients said they themselves were 'definitely' prepared for their appointment
- 38%** of respondents felt they received the right care at the right time

“

I was given an appointment time, was called at that time, in the comfort of my home. I had a list of questions on my kitchen table and was able to attend virtually with ease.

”

“

Being able to get advice in a timely manner without the need to travel and arrange childcare. I would generally delay getting making an in person appointment with my GP due to these prohibitions.

”

Compassion, respect and kindness

Patients were overwhelmingly positive about the compassion they were shown

The respect and kindness offered to patients by healthcare professionals is a fundamental part of the delivery of person-centred care.

When patients were asked about their **most recent virtual care appointment with an outpatient clinic**:

94% said health professionals 'always' treated them with respect and dignity

93% said health professionals were 'always' kind and caring

86% said health professionals 'definitely' listened carefully to their views and concerns

“
**The staff were empathic, kind and very respectful.
Doctors were informative and very kind... very
impressed with their professionalism.**
”

“
**Still received the same respect and courteous
behaviour as if I was there in person.**
”

“
**Doctors and nurses treated me respectfully
with care always.**
”

Trust and confidence

Most patients had confidence in staff and felt their privacy was maintained

Confidence and trust in health professionals and the care they provide is vital for patients at a time when many can feel vulnerable and uncertain.

When patients were asked about their **most recent virtual care appointment with an outpatient clinic**:

84% 'definitely' had trust and confidence in the health professionals treating them

91% said they 'definitely' had enough privacy during their virtual care appointment

72% had previously seen the health professional(s) who delivered their care

After adjusting for a range of factors, older patients and patients who had seen their health professional(s) before were more likely to say they 'definitely' had trust and confidence in the health professionals treating them (88% among 75+ age group compared with 82% among 18–34 age group; and 88% among those who had seen their health professional(s) before compared with 77% among those who had not).*

“

I had confidence in the specialist and the appointment was within days of the referral which was reassuring.

”






*After adjusting for patient characteristics including age, gender, whether they had seen their health professional(s) before, whether they lived in a rural area, the number of virtual care appointments they had within the past 12 months and whether they had a longstanding health condition.

Engagement in care




Patients rated their engagement with healthcare professionals highly

Informing and involving patients is essential in enabling them to engage fully with their care.

When patients were asked about their **most recent virtual care appointment with an outpatient clinic**:

-  86% said health professionals 'always' explained things in a way they could understand
-  86% said health professionals 'definitely' listened carefully to any views and concerns about their care
-  77% were 'definitely' involved, as much as they wanted to be, in decisions about their care and treatment
-  79% were 'definitely' given enough information to manage their care at home
-  86% were told who to contact if they were worried about their condition or treatment after their appointment

A small proportion of patients felt less informed about and involved in their care:

-  4% said they were not involved, as much as they wanted to be, in decisions about their care and treatment
-  4% said they were not given enough information about how to manage their care at home
-  14% said they were not told who to contact if they were worried about their condition or treatment after their appointment

“

I have always found that the staff are extremely friendly, helpful and considerate with their instructions.

”

Overview of results

Virtual care with general practitioners

Virtual care with general practitioners

Many hospital outpatients need supplementary care from general practitioners (GPs) before and after their hospital appointment. When this care is effective and well coordinated with outpatient clinics it can help contribute to a positive experience for patients throughout their journey of care.

Of the 2,816 respondents who provided feedback about their experiences of virtual care with public hospital outpatient clinics, 1,810 also provided feedback about their virtual care experiences with a GP.

Most hospital outpatients also had a positive experience using virtual care with their GPs

When asked to reflect on **all of their experiences of virtual care with a GP throughout 2021**, most hospital outpatients gave high ratings of care:

92% rated the virtual care they received as 'very good' (63%) or 'good' (29%)

98% said the care and treatment they received during their virtual care appointments helped them 'definitely' (73%) or 'to some extent' (25%)

89% said the opportunity to use virtual care 'definitely' (58%) or 'to some extent' (31%) helped ensure their care was well coordinated between the GP and the hospital outpatient clinic

Patients cited convenience (77%) and time savings (63%) as the two most common benefits of virtual care with a GP.

Some patients were less positive about their **experiences of virtual care with a GP throughout 2021**:

7% said they would not use virtual care again, if given the choice

26% said their virtual care experiences were 'not as good' as in-person appointments

When asked about the challenges of virtual care with a GP, 35% said they would have been more comfortable talking in person.

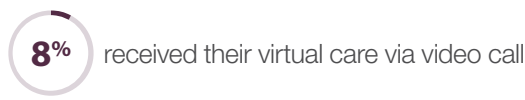
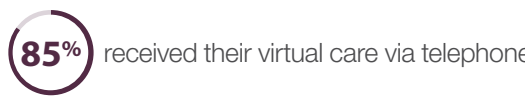
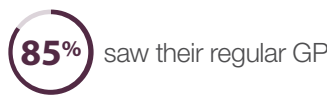
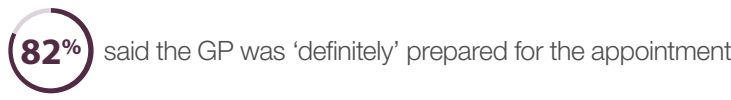
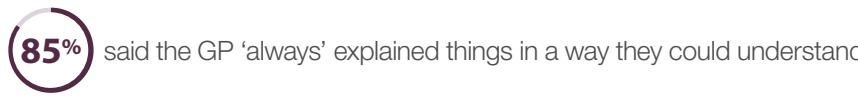
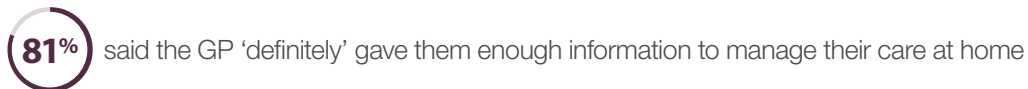
“

I really appreciated not having to wait with sick people in a doctor's surgery. I felt safer waiting at home.

”

Virtual care with general practitioners

When hospital outpatients were asked about their **most recent virtual care appointment with a GP**:

-  8% received their virtual care via video call
-  85% received their virtual care via telephone
-  85% saw their regular GP
-  82% said the GP was 'definitely' prepared for the appointment
-  85% said the GP 'always' explained things in a way they could understand
-  81% said the GP 'definitely' gave them enough information to manage their care at home

When asked to select from a range of reasons for their appointment, the most commonly cited were prescriptions (51%), test results (31%) and referrals (26%). Around a quarter of patients (26%) said their virtual care was for a regular check up while 21% said it was for an initial or follow-up consultation.

Results for all survey questions and response options regarding experiences of virtual care with a GP are provided from page 28 of this report.

“
As my GP telehealth consults were over the phone, I couldn't get their advice on matters that required them to have a look at my body to be able to give a diagnosis.
”

“
Best part of virtual care was not having to attend a doctor's surgery during COVID-19 restrictions.
”

All survey results

All survey results

This section includes results for all performance questions from the Virtual Care Survey 2021. Selected contextual questions (e.g. relating to patient characteristics) are also presented in a monochrome colour scale. Questions appear in the same order, and under the same headers, as in the questionnaire.

Comparisons with Virtual Care Survey 2020 results, where available, are provided for the most positive response option. To see more detailed results from 2020, view the report at bhi.nsw.gov.au

Results are presented for each response option for all questions. For those overall experience questions where BHI's analyses identified insights could be gained from further by-group breakdowns, results are also presented by age, rurality (of patient postcode), number of virtual care appointments in 2021, whether they had seen the health professional(s) before and type of virtual care (telephone or online).

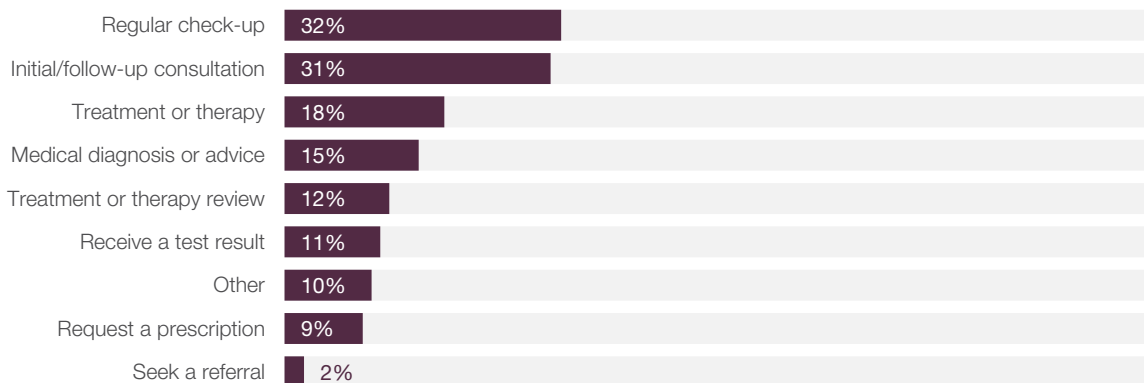
Results for questions from the 'About you' section of the questionnaire are not included in this report.

Virtual care with a hospital outpatient clinic

For the following questions, patients were asked about their most recent virtual care appointment with a hospital outpatient clinic.

Q1

What was the purpose of your most recent virtual care appointment?



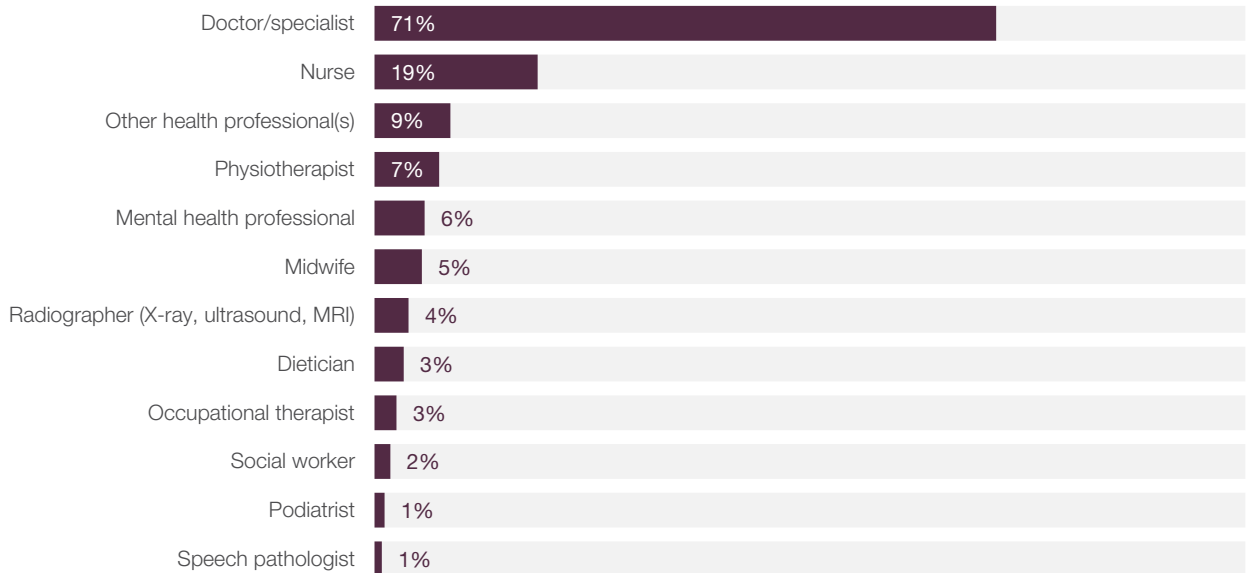
Q2

Did the appointment time suit you?

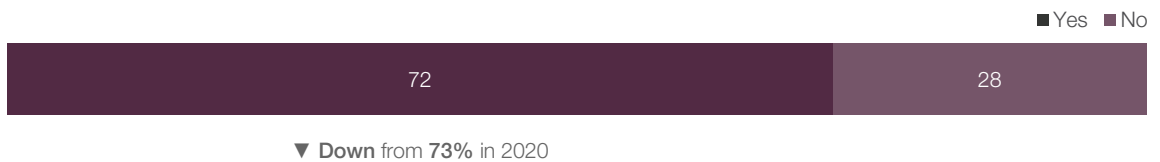


▲ Up from 95% in 2020

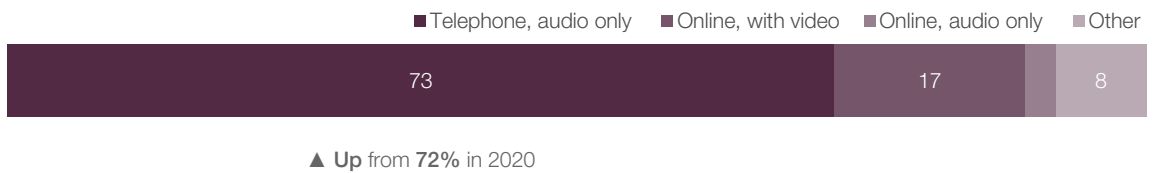
Q3 Who did you see during this virtual care appointment?



Q4 Had you seen the health professional(s) before, either in person or via telephone or video?



Q5 How did you access your most recent virtual care appointment?



Q6 Did you experience any problems with the connection or technology during this appointment?



Q7

Did you receive technical support from staff to help you participate in your appointment?



Unchanged from 2020

Q8

Was the health professional(s) adequately prepared for your appointment?



▲ Up from 84% in 2020

Q9

Were you adequately prepared for this appointment?



Unchanged from 2020

For the following questions, patients were asked about the care and treatment at their most recent virtual care appointment with a hospital outpatient clinic.

Q10

Thinking about the care and treatment at your most recent virtual care appointment, did the health professional(s) explain things in a way you could understand?



Unchanged from 2020

Q11

Were you involved, as much as you wanted to be, in decisions about your care and treatment?



Unchanged from 2020

Q12

Did the health professional(s) listen carefully to any views and concerns you had?



▲ Up from 85% in 2020

Q13

Did you have confidence and trust in the health professional(s) treating you?



▼ Down from 85% in 2020

Q14

Was the health professional(s) kind and caring towards you?



▲ Up from 91% in 2020

Q15

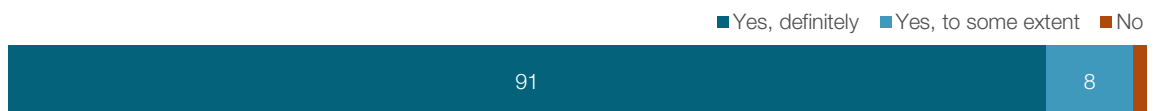
Were you treated with respect and dignity during your appointment?



Unchanged from 2020

Q16

Did you have enough privacy during your appointment?



▲ Up from 90% in 2020

Q17

During your appointment, were you given enough information about how to manage your care at home?



Unchanged from 2020

Q18

Were you told who to contact if you were worried about your condition or treatment after your appointment?



▼ Down from 88% in 2020

For the following questions, patients were asked about their experiences of virtual care with hospital outpatient clinics in the past 12 months.

Q19

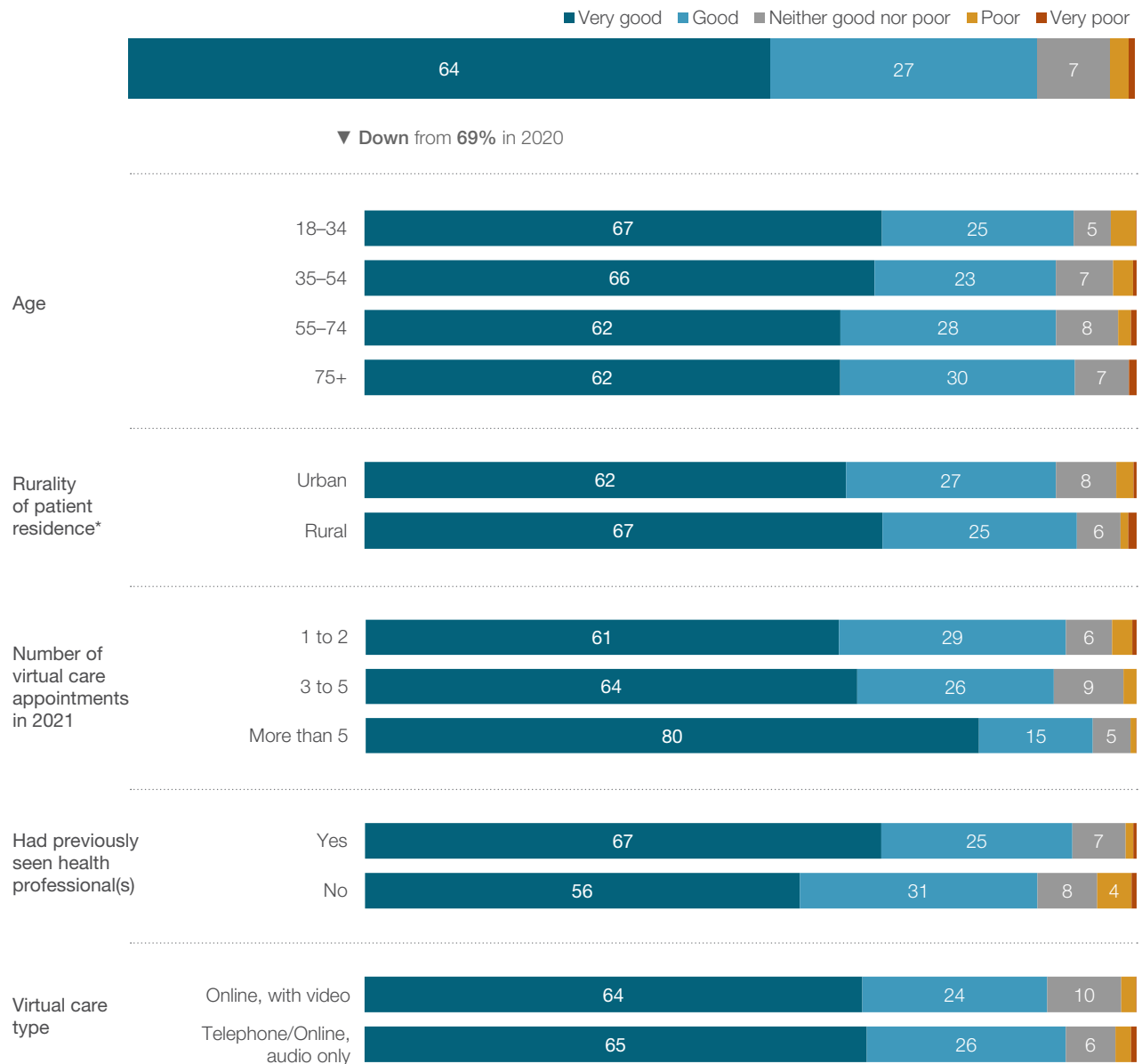
How many virtual care appointments have you had with a hospital outpatient clinic in the past 12 months?



▼ Down from 54% in 2020

Q20

Overall, how would you rate the virtual care you received?



**Urban' and 'rural' are classified using the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+), developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). For more information, see the [technical supplement](#).

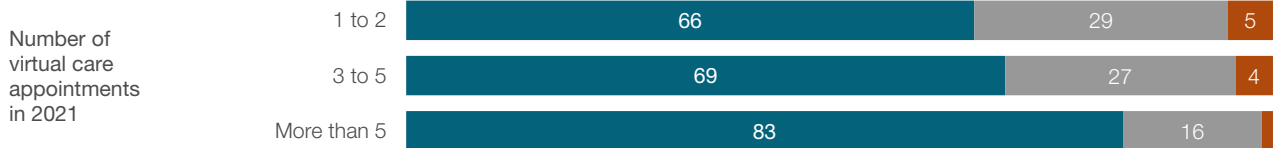
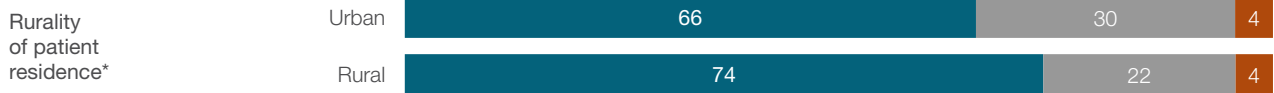
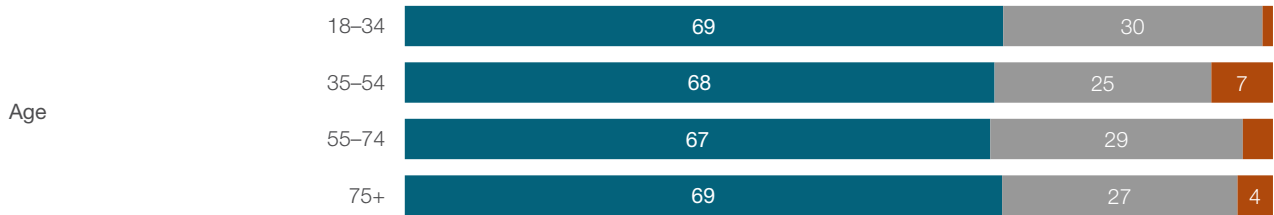
Q21

If asked about your virtual care experience by friends and family, how would you respond?

■ I would speak highly of virtual care ■ I would neither speak highly nor be critical ■ I would be critical of virtual care



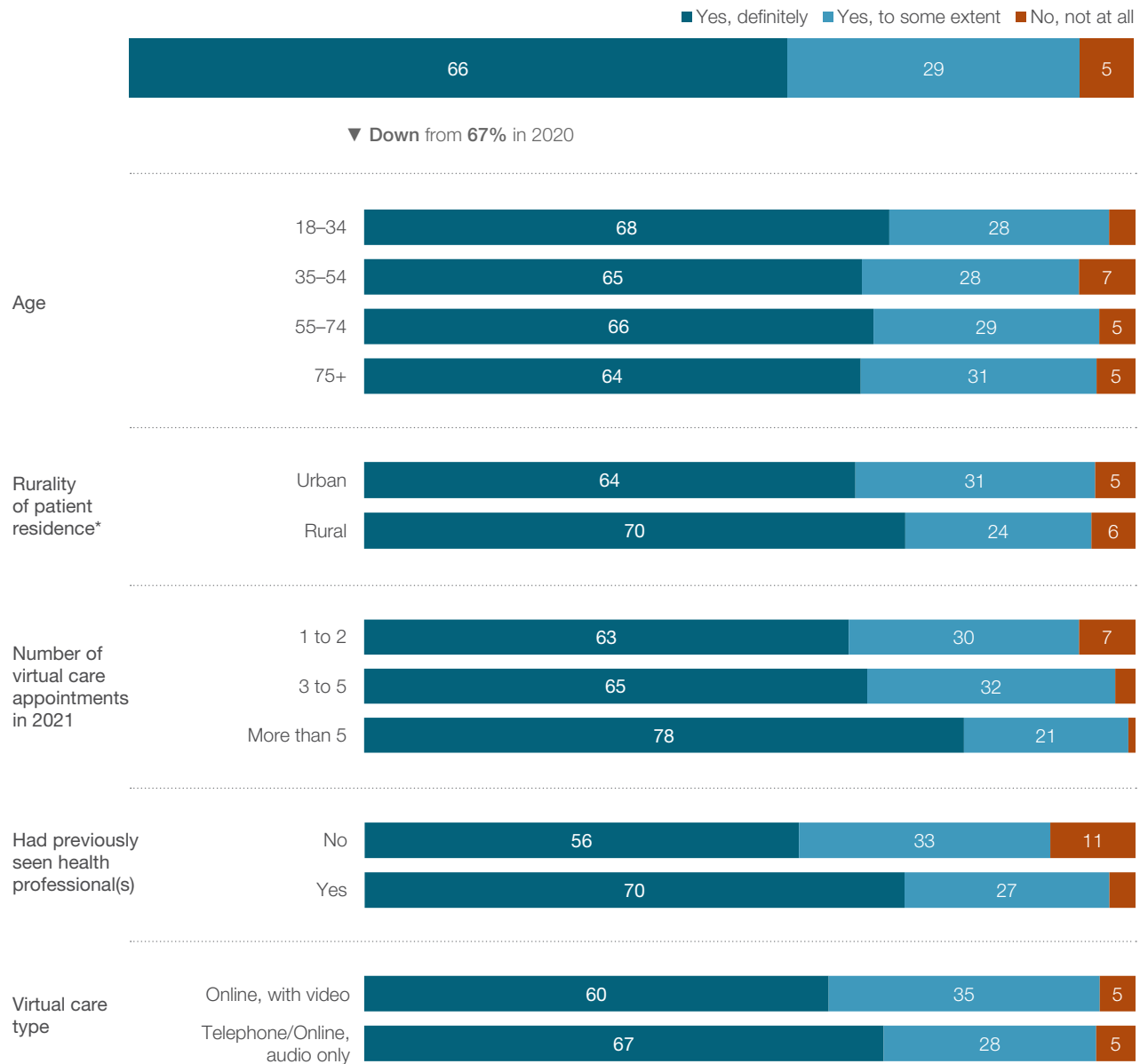
▼ Down from 70% in 2020



*'Urban' and 'rural' are classified using ARIA+, developed by the ABS. For more information, see the [technical supplement](#).

Q22

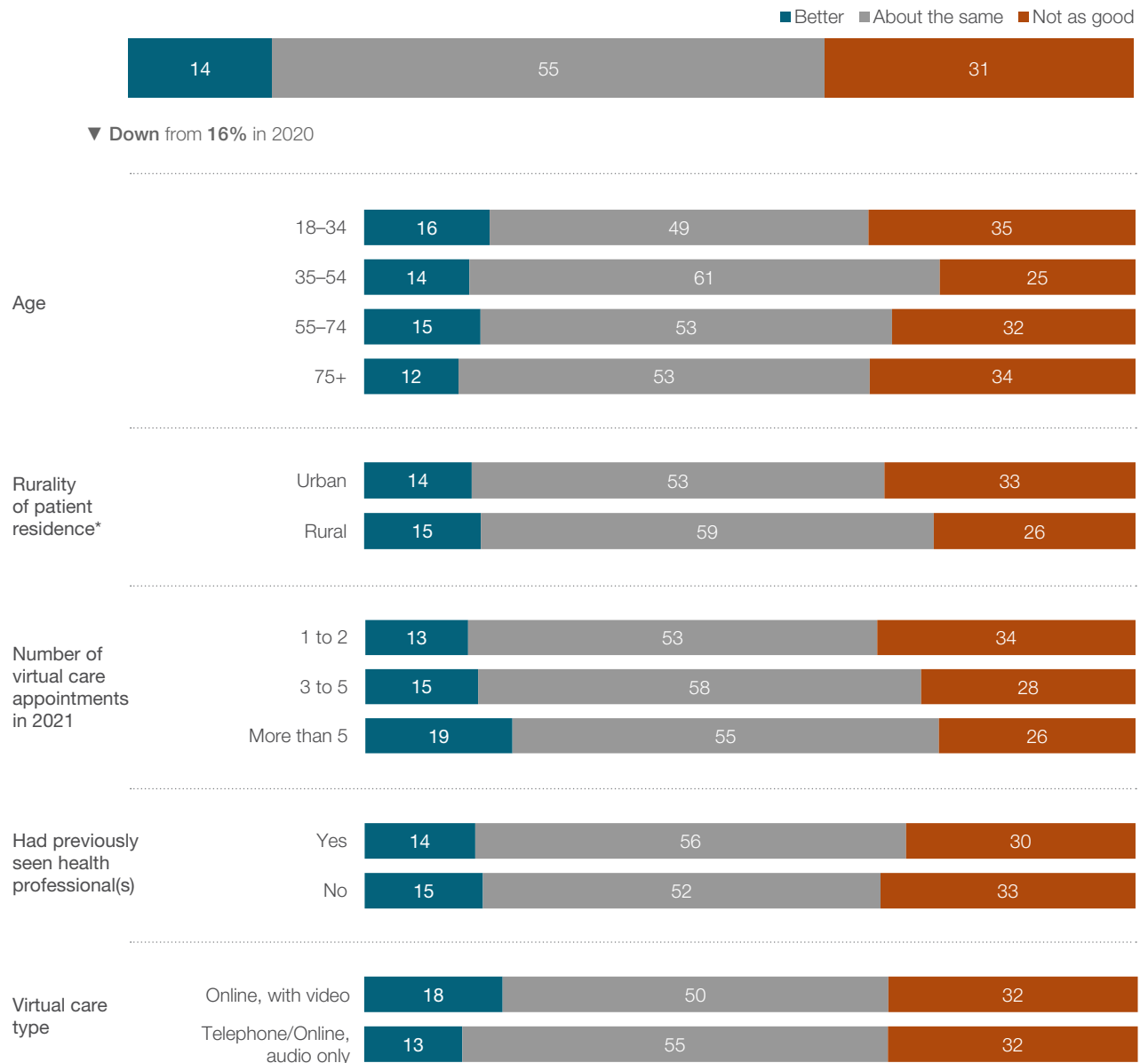
Did the care and treatment received through virtual care help you?



*'Urban' and 'rural' are classified using ARIA+, developed by the ABS. For more information, see the [technical supplement](#).

Q23

Compared to in-person appointments, was your virtual care experience...?

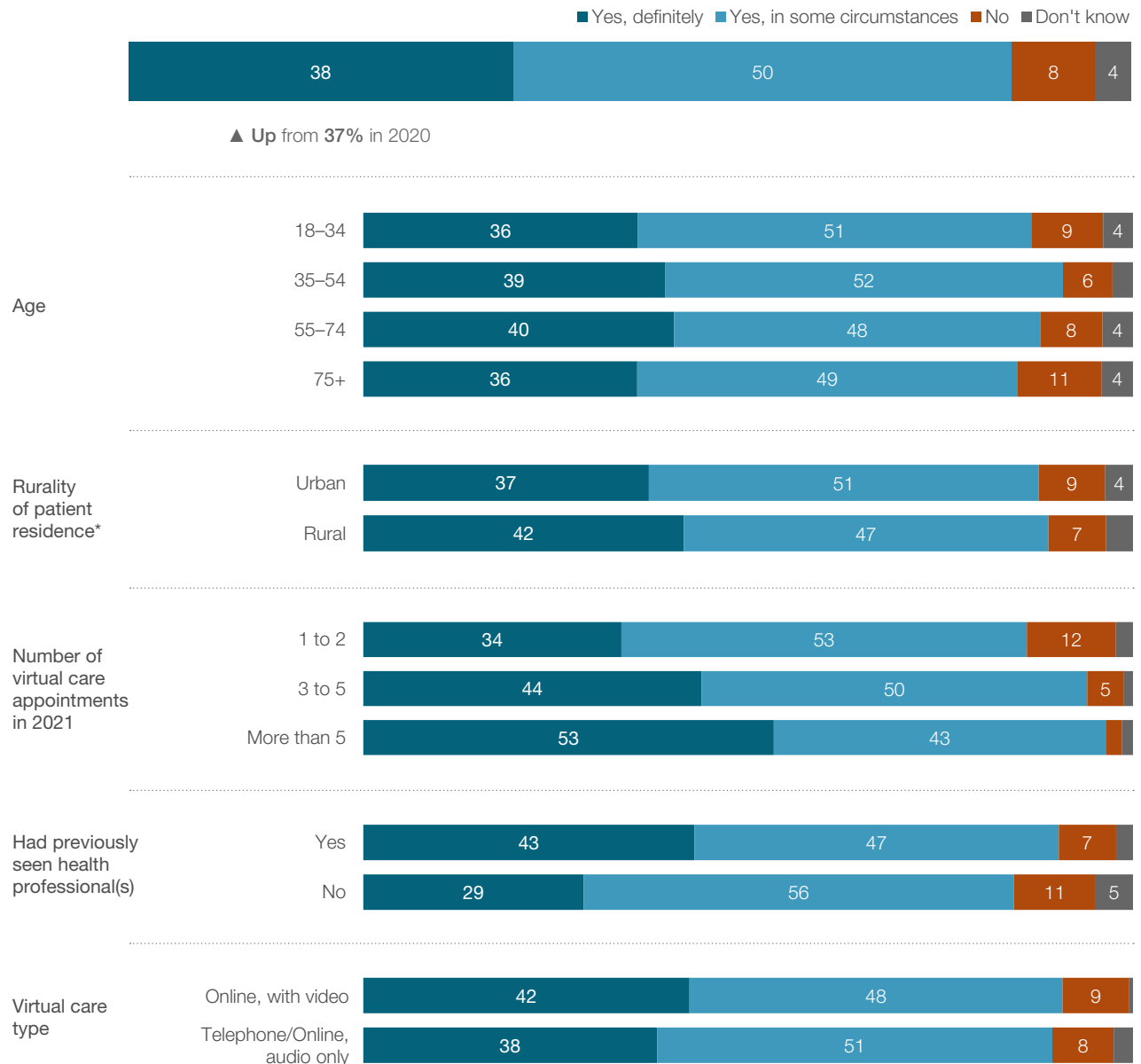


▼ Down from 16% in 2020

*'Urban' and 'rural' are classified using ARIA+, developed by the ABS. For more information, see the [technical supplement](#).

Q24

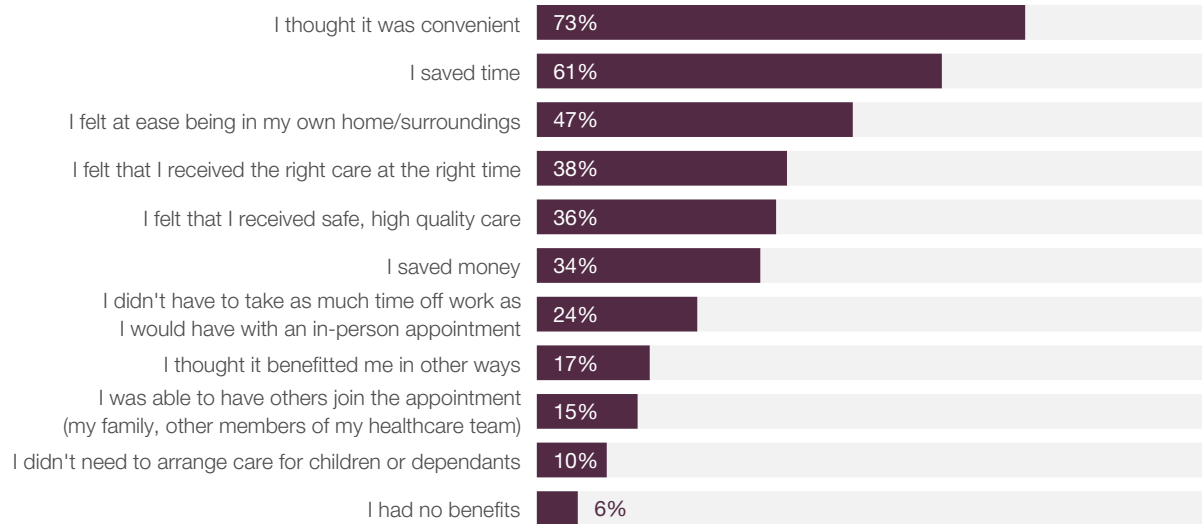
If given the choice, would you use virtual care again?



*'Urban' and 'rural' are classified using ARIA+, developed by the ABS. For more information, see the [technical supplement](#).

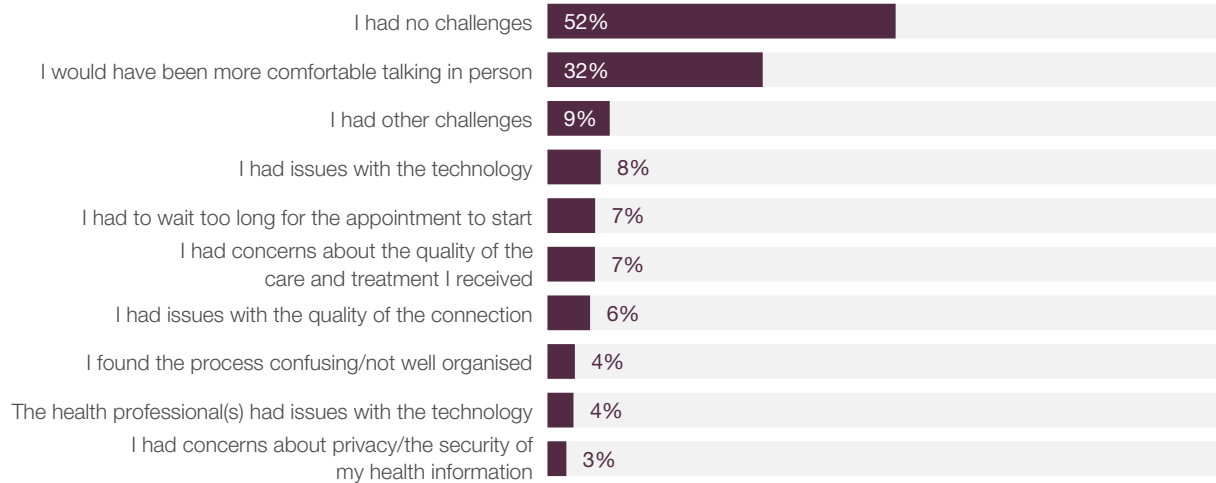
Q25

Thinking about your experiences of virtual care, what have been the benefits for you?



Q26

Thinking about your experiences of virtual care, what have been the challenges for you?



Virtual care with a general practitioner

Q27

In the past 12 months, how many in-person appointments have you had with a general practitioner (GP) for your own health?



Q28

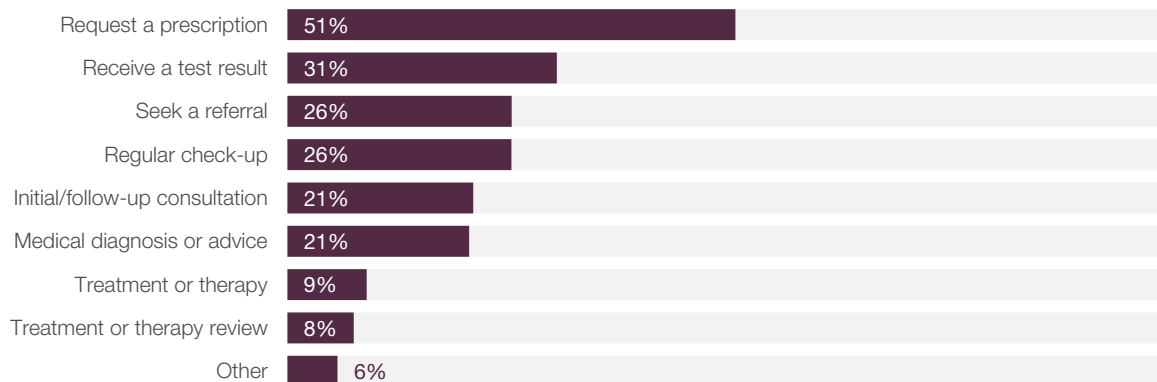
In the past 12 months, how many virtual care appointments have you had with a GP for your own health?



For the following questions, patients were asked about their most recent virtual care appointment with a GP.

Q29

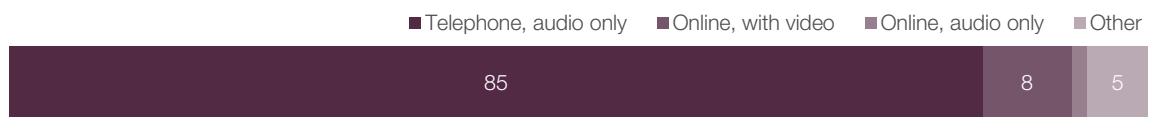
What was the purpose of your most recent virtual care appointment with a GP?



Q30 Was this appointment with your regular GP?



Q31 How did you access your most recent virtual care appointment [with a GP]?



Q32 Was the GP adequately prepared for this appointment?



Q33 Thinking about the care and treatment at your most recent virtual care appointment, did the GP explain things in a way you could understand?



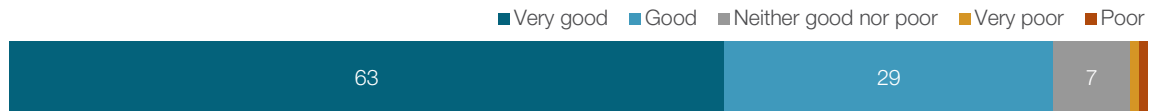
Q34 During this appointment [with a GP], were you given enough information about how to manage your care at home?



For the following questions, patients were asked about all of their virtual care appointments with a GP in the 12 months prior to completing the survey.

Q35

Overall, how would you rate the virtual care you received from GPs in the past 12 months?



Q36

Did the care and treatment received through virtual care [from GPs] help you?



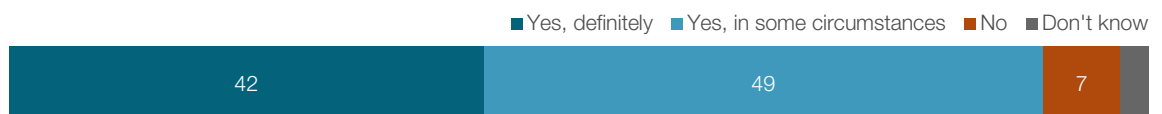
Q37

Compared with in-person appointments, were your virtual care experiences [with GPs]...?



Q38

If given the choice, would you use virtual care [with a GP] again?



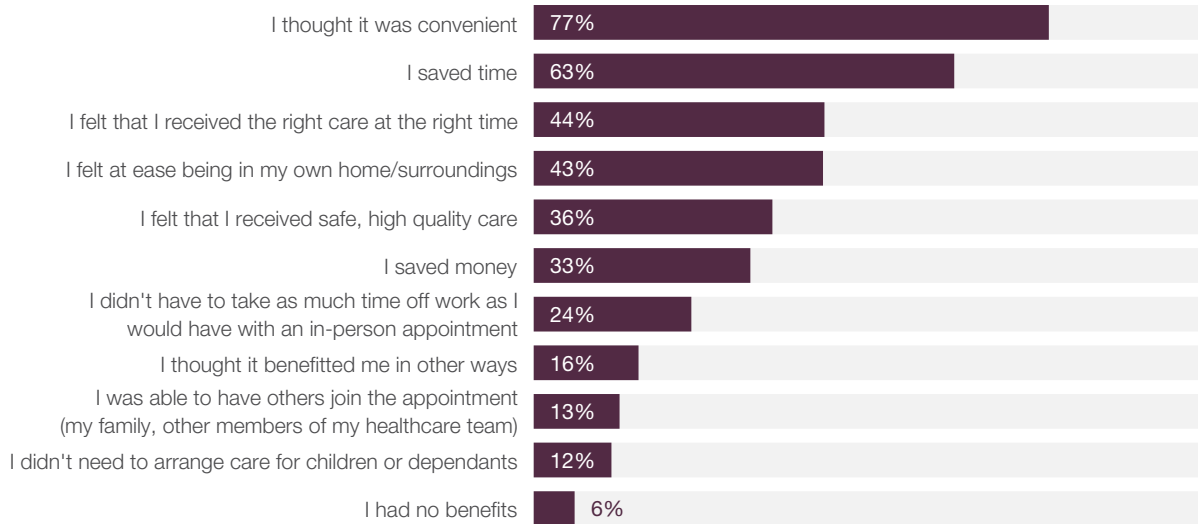
Q39

Did the opportunity to use virtual care help ensure that your care was well coordinated between the GP and the hospital outpatient clinic?*



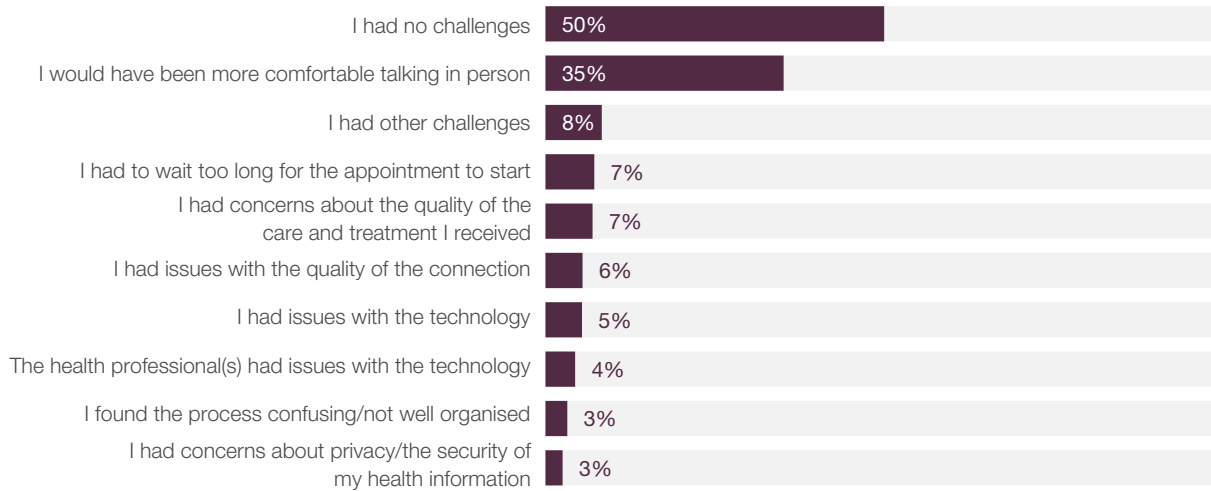
Q40

Thinking about your experiences of virtual care [with a GP], what have been the benefits for you?



Q41

Thinking about your experiences of virtual care [with a GP], what have been the challenges for you?



About the Bureau of Health Information

The Bureau of Health Information (BHI) is a board-governed organisation that provides independent information about the performance of the NSW healthcare system.

BHI was established in 2009 and supports the accountability of the healthcare system by providing regular and detailed information to the community, government and healthcare professionals. This in turn supports quality improvement by highlighting how well the healthcare system is functioning and where there are opportunities to improve.

BHI manages the NSW Patient Survey Program, gathering information from patients about their experiences and outcomes of care in public hospitals and other healthcare facilities.

BHI publishes a range of reports and information products, including interactive tools, that provide objective, accurate and meaningful information about how the health system is performing.

BHI's work relies on the efforts of a wide range of healthcare, data and policy experts. All of our assessment efforts leverage the work of hospital coders, analysts, technicians and healthcare providers who gather, codify and supply data. Our public reporting of performance information is enabled and enhanced by the infrastructure, expertise and stewardship provided by colleagues from NSW Health and its pillar organisations.

bhi.nsw.gov.au