



What You Need to Know About Communicating Electronically With Your Healthcare Providers

Electronic communication between patients and healthcare providers is part of the way healthcare is changing to become safer, better coordinated, more efficient, and focused on helping patients like you manage their health and healthcare.

You may be getting requests from different healthcare providers who have taken care of you — doctors, clinics, and hospitals — asking you to sign up to communicate with them online.

Why now? Until recently, most health records were stored in paper files. Today, healthcare providers and hospitals are adopting electronic health records and other information technologies that make it possible for patients and providers to easily and conveniently communicate with each other over the Internet.

Many providers are participating in national programs that promote electronic communication with patients. Some of the programs that you may hear about are:

- **Meaningful use of electronic health records:** a federal program that promotes the use of electronic health records in physician offices and hospitals.
- **Patient-Centered Medical Home:** a voluntary program that certifies providers who have developed an approach to primary care services or “medical home” that is responsive to individual patients’ needs.
- **Accountable Care Organization:** a voluntary program that brings together all the healthcare services a patient might need, usually for those with a chronic illness, and pays for those services based on how well they are coordinated.

Sharing information online with your healthcare provider is safe and secure. Strict federal and state laws help to assure that health information is available only to those with permission to see it.

Talk with your healthcare providers soon to learn more about what they are offering and how you and your providers can easily and securely view your health information, when and where it is needed for your care.

Here is a quick look at the main types of technology your providers may offer:



Patient Portal

A secure online website that gives patients convenient 24-hour access to personal health information from the electronic health record maintained by the provider. In addition, a portal may allow you to make an appointment online, receive appointment reminders, send and receive secure messages to and from your healthcare provider, and request prescription refills.



Personal Health Record

A PHR can be an online storage center for a patient's most important health information. There are two main types:

- **Tethered/Connected PHR:** This type is linked to a specific provider or health plan's information system. With a tethered PHR, patients can access their own records, add information, and, for example, may be able to see the trend of their lab results over the last year, their immunization history, medication history, or due dates for health screenings.
- **Standalone PHR:** Patients can fill in information from their own records. The information is stored on patients' computers or securely on the Internet. In some cases, a standalone PHR, such as a community-based record, can also accept data from external sources, including providers, pharmacies, and laboratories. With a standalone PHR, patients could add diet or exercise information to track progress over time. Patients can decide whether to share the information with providers, family members, or anyone else involved in their care.



Blue Button

First used at the Veteran's Administration, Blue Button has been adopted by many private healthcare providers as a way for patients to access their health information electronically. You might see the Blue Button symbol on a patient portal or tethered PHR.

The type of information available through any of the technology options described above will depend on where the information is coming from — a healthcare provider, health insurance company, or another source such as a pharmacy or a lab — since each has different kinds of information. The types of important health information you may be able to view and download include:

- Current medications
- Allergies
- Medical treatment information from a doctor or hospital
- Test results
- Health insurance information
- Summary of the care received at an office or clinic visit

Want to know more?

- For more information to help you decide whether a personal health record is right for you, go here: www.oag.ca.gov/privacy/facts/medical-privacy/health-record
- Here's where to find out about your rights to your medical information and what you need to know about patient medical record privacy: www.oag.ca.gov/privacy/facts/medical-privacy/patient-rights
- Check out this video for information about the benefits of new health information technology:
<http://youtu.be/oMRpSS0mFJO>
- Find additional information about how health information technology can benefit you and your family at: www.healthit.gov/patients-families/basics-health-it