

Consumers' Quick Reference Guide to Personal Health Records

The changing healthcare environment includes significant opportunities for improving care by providing consumers with increased access to and management of their health information and the health information of those loved ones they care for. This guide will answer some of the questions you may have about personal health records, an information management tool that many see as vital to improving the quality of healthcare.

THE PERSONAL HEALTH RECORD

A Personal Health Record, or "PHR," is an electronic tool for managing all of your health and medical information in one location. Generally Web-based, a PHR may include information about your health and medication history, your family's medical history and other pertinent information, such as where you live, emergency contact information, allergies and travel destinations that may be subject to health precautions.

THE PURPOSE OF A PHR

The PHR is a tool for you to better manage your care and support more effective communication with your physicians and other healthcare professionals (referred to here collectively as "clinicians"). It is important for your clinicians to know details about previous medical conditions or treatments to offer you the best possible care. A Web-based PHR can help you keep a more-complete, up-to-date record of dates of care, specific treatments, tests and medications. With better information, you and your clinician can make more-informed care decisions. If you choose, you may be able to print or electronically share information from your PHR with clinicians so they have a more-complete picture of your medical conditions, medications and previous care.

BENEFITS TO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

Convenience

- PHRs can provide a detailed record of your health history without you having to remember or keep paper records of immunization dates, injury and illness dates or treatments you have received.
- Should you choose to, the information in your PHR can be shared with your clinician so he or she can easily see what types of treatments you have undergone and what medications have been prescribed for you.
- As doctors' offices and hospitals increasingly use electronic record-keeping systems, PHRs connected to hospital or medical office information systems may simplify the patient registration process.

Education

- PHRs may include or link to educational resources and tools such as wellness programs and health risk assessments.
- PHRs may have features to help you track your diet, exercise and other everyday health behaviors.

Access to life-saving information

- PHRs may help clinicians identify potentially harmful interactions between medications you may be taking.
- Web-based PHRs can be an important source for critical information when you are traveling, in need of emergency care or providing caregiver support to dependents who are elderly or away from home.

PHR PRIVACY AND ACCESS

Well-designed PHRs are private and secure. No one can view a person's PHR without appropriate consent, except possibly in a critical emergency situation (for which you may be able to specify access and viewing permissions that would apply). In this type of situation, emergency care clinicians should be able to learn if you have allergies or are taking medications that may affect your care, for example, and so may be able to access your medical history when you are unable to provide them with the information they need. The information contained in your PHR is meant to be available at all times, whenever and wherever you and your authorized users have access to the Web.



Frequently Asked Questions

1. What information is included in my PHR?

Your PHR will have the ability to include a health summary, risk factors such as allergies, family and social histories, routine and emergency contact details, health insurance account information, care reminders, medication history and a list of office visits, inpatient hospital stays and outpatient hospital treatments. You may also choose to include other important information (e.g. over-the-counter medications or counseling services you may receive).

2. Where does the information in my PHR come from?

Your PHR can be populated from a variety of different sources. Some of the information will be entered by you. Other pieces of information may be provided automatically through your visits to clinicians and from the claims paid by your health insurance company. In some cases, your PHR can be pre-populated with historical and current medical and pharmacy information from multiple electronic sources and updated periodically.

3. How will the information from my PHR be used?

You can use the information in your PHR to keep track of all of your personal health information. Clinicians you see may use the information in your PHR to help determine a course of treatment and to coordinate care for chronic health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

4. Where is my PHR?

Typically, PHRs are kept on a secure Web site that users access with a personal login name and password. Only you or a person you give authorization to can create or update your PHR. PHRs are saved on a Web site that may be associated with or sponsored by your health insurance company; linked to your clinician, an independent commercial Web site such as Google™, WebMD® or Microsoft® Health Vault™; or provided through health information exchanges, which are secure, electronic systems — run by official local or regional organizations — that give clinicians fast access to the information they need to provide quality care.

5. Who could see the information in my PHR?

Only individuals authorized by the consumer may have access to the information. These authorized individuals may be clinicians, a family member or another person(s) you identify. In an emergency, the clinicians that are caring for you also may be able to see the personal health information contained in your PHR, should you authorize this feature.

6. How will clinicians access the PHR?

You may elect to give your clinicians a hard copy summary of your PHR before or at the time of your visit. Also, with your authorization, you can have your information transmitted securely to your clinicians or their authorized staff so that they can view your personal health information before or during your visit.

7. Can I choose what PHR information clinicians see?

PHRs may afford some control over what an authorized clinician or care giver is able to view. If clinicians access your personal health information, they will be able to see some or all of your PHR's contents, based on your choices and the privacy options provided by the PHR system you are using. At any time, you can review your PHR, assign access authorizations and/or restrict access to your records.

8. Can I access my PHR if I change physicians or health insurance companies?

In general, the answer is yes, although the specifics regarding how a PHR can be moved may depend on the type of PHR and on who hosts your PHR Web site.

9. Where can I find more information about PHRs?

Information, along with Web links to several other resources, can be found at www.bcbs.com/phr_guide.

This guide was created through a collaboration of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, an association of independent Blue Cross and Blue Shield companies, and the American College of Physicians, the American Osteopathic Association of Medical Informatics and the Medical Group Management Association.