Electronic Health Records: What You Need to Know

Pennsylvania
REACH
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Regional Extension &
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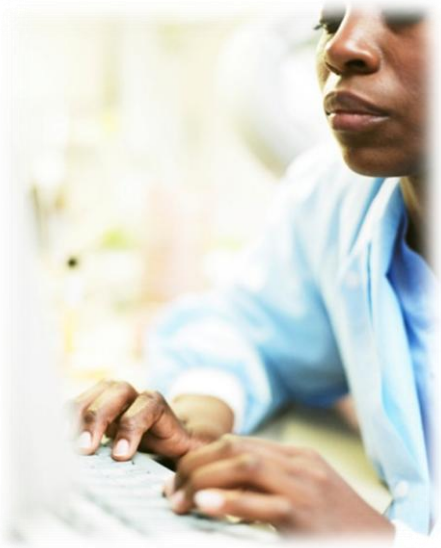
More and more doctors are replacing medical charts with Electronic Health Records (EHRs), but what does that mean? And what does it mean for your health?

In this handout, we will explain the basics of EHRs and answer some common questions about them.

We will cover the following topics:

1. What is an EHR?
2. What information is in an EHR?
3. How is an EHR good for my doctor and me?
4. How can sharing my EHR be good for my health?
5. How could an EHR help me in an emergency?
6. What does it mean if my doctor participates in electronic health information exchange?
7. What does the future hold for EHR systems?
8. What laws help protect my medical record?
9. What is HIPAA, and how does it help protect my medical record?
10. How can I help protect my privacy?



What is an EHR?

An EHR is when your medical record is in a digital format. That means a computer is used to record, store and review your medical information.

There's an easy way to tell if your doctor uses an EHR system. Does the nurse or doctor bring a medical chart into the exam room? Or does the nurse or doctor use a computer or small hand-held device to enter information into your record?

What information is in an EHR?

The same kind of information that is in your medical chart is in your EHR. Your EHR might include:

- Basic information, such as name, address, phone number and emergency contact
- Medical history
- List of medications, allergies and shots you have had
- Laboratory test results, such as blood work
- Radiology images, such as X-rays, CAT scans and MRIs
- Advanced directives, living wills, and health powers of attorney

How is an EHR system good for my doctor and me?

Reduces errors:

- Eliminates errors caused by illegible handwriting
- Checks to make sure the drugs you are taking are not harmful when taken with other drugs

Improves security:

- Allows your doctor to make a back up copy of all medical records. If the office catches fire or floods, the medical records are safe
- Allows your doctor to keep track of, and to limit, who looks at your medical record

Saves time:

- Ends searching for a lost medical chart
- Ends thumbing through the pages of your medical chart

Improves care:

- Tells your doctor when it's time for you to get tests and shots, such as a yearly flu shot
- Tells your doctor when he needs to follow up on lab tests, especially if they show you have a problem

How can sharing my EHR be good for my health?

An EHR can let your doctor send and receive health information about you over the Internet. Your doctor can share information about you with other doctors, as well as with hospitals, labs and the drug store. That can benefit you in many ways:

- You don't have to fill out your medical history over and over.
- Once you inform your doctor about your medications and allergies, you don't have to worry about forgetting to inform a new doctor.
- Other than routine tests, you won't have to get the same tests twice because your doctor can see if another doctor has already ordered it.
- Your medical history will be easy to get to in an emergency.
- Your doctor can send your prescription to the drug store, so you don't have to take it or wait for it to be filled.

An EHR system can let your doctor send your medical information to the drug store and the emergency room. That can save time and even save your life.

How could an EHR help me in an emergency?

If EHRs were in use across the nation, they could be a lifesaver. Here's an example of how it could work. Sixty-four year-old Barbara has a pacemaker. She is allergic to penicillin but takes medication for diabetes and high blood pressure. While on vacation, she hops in the car to run an errand. (cont.)

On the way she is involved in a car accident and knocked unconscious. When she wakes up in the emergency room, she is disoriented and can't remember what medications she takes.

If Barbara's physician in Pennsylvania had an EHR system, he could be contacted and could use the Internet to instantly send her medical record to the emergency room doctor. Her medical information would be complete and organized, and the emergency room doctor would be able to quickly provide safe, appropriate care. Otherwise, Barbara's doctor would have to fax her medical records to the emergency room or try to give the emergency room doctor all the information he needs over the phone.

What does it mean if my doctor participates in electronic health information exchange?

If your doctor participates in a health information exchange (HIE) or some other organization that facilitates the electronic exchange of health information, make sure to ask under what conditions your doctor may share your information within this type of organization.

What does the future hold for EHR systems?

In some doctors' offices, patients can already use the computer to do the following:

- View their medical record online
- Get their lab results online
- Schedule or change appointments online
- Receive reminders for regular tests and checkups online
- Print a copy of their medical record and medicines to take to another doctor
- E-mail their doctor to ask a question
- Get their medications renewed online

What laws help protect my medical record?

You may not realize it, but your medical record is a legal document. It is protected by state and federal laws. Many of these laws include standards that are applicable to EHRs.

What is HIPAA, and how does it help protect my medical record?

The federal government passed a law called the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996. HIPAA required the creation of standards to help protect your personal health information.

How does the HIPAA Security Rule help keep my medical record secure?

HIPAA requires health care providers to make reasonable efforts to protect the privacy of your medical records so that they cannot be accidentally or illegally read, altered, shared or destroyed.

How does the HIPAA Privacy Rule help protect my privacy?

The HIPAA Privacy Rule went into effect in ’03. It created national standards to help protect the privacy of your personal health information by:

- Giving patients more control over their health information
- Setting boundaries on the use and release of health records
- Establishing safeguards that health care providers must meet to help protect the privacy of health information
- Balancing the need for patient privacy with public health needs
- Giving patients the right to look at and get a copy of their health record and to ask that errors be corrected

What about mental health & addiction treatment records?

State and federal laws offer increased protection for the confidentiality of records dealing with mental health and addiction treatment. The use of EHRs does nothing to alter this higher degree of confidentiality protection. Except for some limited circumstances, these records may still not be disclosed without your specific authorization.

How can I help protect my privacy?

There are several things you can do to help protect the privacy of your medical records, no matter whether they are kept as traditional medical charts or as part of an EHR system. The Health Privacy Project, a group devoted to protecting patients' privacy, offers these tips:

- Read your doctor's notice of privacy practices carefully. Your doctor should give you a written notice about how your medical information will be used.
- Talk about privacy concerns with your doctor. Your doctor should be able to help you understand how your health information will be used.
- Ask how your medical information is shared in a large health care organization. Ask how it may be shared within the organization and with others.
- Read authorization forms before you sign. Find out who you are allowing to receive your medical records and for what purpose.
- Request a copy of your medical record. You have a right to look at and copy your records.
- Review your records. You have the right to review your records and to make sure everything is correct.
- Look for privacy policies on health Web sites. Be careful about how much information you provide for surveys and health screenings on health Web sites.

For more information about Electronic Health Records, please visit PA REACH West's Web site at:

www.pareachwest.org

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