

Using Email to Communicate Protected Health Information

We frequently use electronic formats, like email to communicate protected patient health information (PHI) between health care providers.

The HIPAA Privacy Rule permits physicians and other members of the healthcare team to disclose PHI to other healthcare providers via email for treatment, payment, and healthcare operations. The rule also requires that we have appropriate safeguards in place to protect the privacy of the information we are sending or receiving through email.

Each person working with our patient's health information is responsible for the confidentiality of the information. Imagine:

Instead of sending an email to the intended provider's office, you sent it to the patient's employer.

Instead of sending an email to a patient with highly sensitive health information, you sent it to another patient?

A misdirected email breaches patient privacy and exposes their health information to an individual who has not been authorized to see their information.

All misdirected emails must be reported to the HIPAA Privacy Office so that the breach may be investigated quickly and any required actions for reporting and notification can be taken.

By following a few basic tips when we email patient health information, we can ensure the protection of our patient's privacy.

Email Basics:

Emails between Washington University School of Medicine and BJC/SLCH providers are secure.

Email going outside of the WUSM network is not secure. The email must have a confidentiality statement as part of the email and attachments with PHI must be encrypted.

The subject line of the email should not contain the patient name.

Before Sending the Email

Confirm that the email address you have for the receiving party is correct.

Confirm in the display window that you have typed the email address(es) correctly – before you hit send.

Make sure the attachment containing PHI is encrypted.

If you send an email to the wrong recipient:

Notify your supervisor and Department Privacy Liaison immediately!

Contact the individual that received the email in error. Ask them to delete the email from their inbox and from their deleted items file and to send you an email to confirm they have completely deleted the message.

Complete the Breach Incident Form and submit to the HIPAA Privacy Office. Your supervisor and/or Privacy Liaison will be able to assist you with this.