

THE HIPAA PRIVACY RULE
(Health Information Portability and Accountability Act)

1.) What information is confidential?

All information about a patient is considered private or “confidential” whether written on paper, saved on a computer, or spoken aloud. This includes their name, address, age, Social Security number, and any other personal information. It also includes the reason the patient is sick or in the hospital, the treatments and medications they are receiving, caregivers’ notes, and information about past health conditions.

If you reveal any of this information to someone who does not need to know it, you have violated a patient’s confidentiality, and you have broken the law!

2.) Do you need to know information about a patient?

If you need to see patient information to perform your job – as doctors, nurses, and billing clerks do – you are allowed to do so. If you do not need the information to do your job, it is best that you not seek or gain the information (or even access to the information).

3.) What if you could not help overhearing or learning patient information?

Not all information is locked up in a file room or protected by passwords in a computer. Remember that this information includes the fact that the patient is at the health care facility in the first place. If you see a friend in the waiting room, you might want to tell another friend or family member later. But you must keep it to yourself. The person you saw may not want anyone to know about the visit.

There is no doubt that you will overhear or see private healthcare information as you do your day-to-day work. As long as you keep it to yourself, you have nothing to worry about.

4.) Even the trash is private.

Trash containers can trap you into violating HIPAA. Patient information stored on paper or computer disks should never be thrown into an open trash container. The reason is simple – no one knows who might end up seeing the trash once it leaves the building.

If you see patient information in an open trash container, tell your supervisor or a supervisor in the area. The supervisor can get rid of it properly either into a locked bin until it can be destroyed or directly into a paper shredder.

5.) Who is the boss when it comes to patient information privacy?

Each organization must have a privacy official to make sure no one breaks the privacy rule. This person is responsible for coming up with the organization’s privacy policies and enforcing them. You should feel comfortable going to the privacy officer and your supervisor with any questions.

If you spot someone breaking the rules, report them to your supervisor or directly to the privacy officer.