

[Home](#) > [Navigating Cancer Care](#) > [Managing Your Care](#) > Understanding Electronic Medical Records

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<http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/managing-your-care/understanding-electronic-medical-records>

Understanding Electronic Medical Records [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board \[2\]](#), 07/2015

When you visit a health care provider, important medical information such as test results, prescriptions, and treatments becomes part of your medical record. Some medical records are kept in paper form. But more and more health care providers are using electronic medical records (EMRs).

What is an electronic medical record?

An EMR is a digital record of a person's medical history that can be shared electronically between health care providers in a medical practice or hospital. Unlike a paper record, EMRs are easily accessible by all members of the health care team from anywhere, at any time, using the Internet.

The acronym "EMR" is often confused with "EHR" (electronic health record). But they are different:

- An EMR is a patient's legal health information (such as test results and prescription entries) owned by one medical practice or hospital.
- An EHR is the part of a patient's record shared between medical practices or hospitals that a patient can own and edit.

Benefits of an EMR

EMRs are part of a larger effort led by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to make health information electronic. The federal government rewards and penalizes doctors, hospitals, and clinics to ensure they begin using EMR systems. EMR supporters believe these records can improve patient health care by:

- **Preventing medical errors.**

- Because EMRs are electronic, they may reduce medical errors caused by handwriting that is difficult to read.
- EMRs may also notify members of the health care team when a prescribed medication may harmfully interact with another medication a patient is taking or when a patient has a drug allergy.

- **Reducing health care costs.**

- EMRs may save money for patients and health care providers in multiple ways. This includes preventing duplication of expensive medical tests and getting rid of costly paperwork.

- **Lessening delays in treatments.**

- EMRs allow the health care team to quickly search for and find medical information. This can improve communication among the team and eliminate possible treatment delays.

- **Decreasing office wait times.**

- EMRs eliminate the need for patients to fill out health forms each time they see their health care providers.
- EMRs also reduce the need to search through numerous paper files for patient information.

- **Improving communication between the health care team and patients.**

- When members of the health care team have immediate and complete access to a patient's information, they can more quickly respond to patients' questions.
- EMRs may also shorten the time a patient must wait for a medical phone call to be returned or a prescription to be filled.
- Some EMRs also provide detailed summaries of office visits and patient instructions.

- **Ensuring the best care.**

- EMRs may help ensure that people with complex diseases, such as cancer, receive the care they need.
- For example, the health care team can closely track treatment schedules in EMRs. This can help doctors avoid or efficiently manage long-term treatment side effects.

Privacy and your EMR

Medical information and records are protected under the federal [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act \(HIPAA\)](#) [3]. With some exceptions, this act states that medical information collected on patients cannot be shared unless a patient gives permission. HIPAA also gives patients the right to see or get a copy of their medical records, even though their doctor or hospital owns them.

Personal health records

Not every health care provider uses EMRs. Some aren't able to share EMRs because they use different data systems that do not communicate with each other. The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) and other organizations are creating technology standards that would allow different EMR systems to more easily share information. In the meantime, personal health records (PHRs) help patients keep a detailed record of their medical care.

Unlike an EMR, which health care providers own and update as required by law, a PHR is voluntary, owned, and maintained by the patient. A PHR does not replace legally required medical records. Learn more about [creating a PHR](#) [4].

ASCO and EMR activities

A person with cancer may need numerous tests and treatments. And cancer survivors need a detailed, [long-term plan for follow-up care](#) [5] that may involve multiple doctors at multiple locations. To ensure your ongoing good health, health care providers must have access to your complete medical history anytime.

To help this effort, ASCO developed the Health Information Technology (Health IT) Work Group. This group advises on proposed IT-related policy. It is also developing cancer-specific clinical data transmission standards for coordination of care. For example, the Health IT working group published guides with technical instructions on how to extract data from ASCO's paper-based chemotherapy treatment plan and summaries so these can be shared with others in the care team.

More Information

[Managing Your Care](#) [6]

[Medical Forms](#) [7]

Additional Resources

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: [Electronic Health Records](#) [8]

Department of Health and Human Services: [Personal Health Records and the HIPAA Privacy Rule](#) [9]

American Health Information Management Association: [My PHR](#) [10]

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/managing-your-care/understanding-electronic-medical-records>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/hipaa/understanding/index.html>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24569>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25394>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25015>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25064>

[8] <https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/E-Health/EHealthRecords/index.html>

[9] <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/hipaa/understanding/special/healthit/phrs.pdf>

[10] <http://myphr.com/>