

## **What is HIPAA?**

HIPAA stands for the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. This legislation, passed in 1996, affects various aspects of health insurance coverage, including improving the portability of and continuity of health coverage, prohibiting discrimination in health coverage, and decreasing time limits for pre-existing conditions. The aspects of HIPAA that your doctor is implementing now are the transaction standards, security standards, and privacy standards.

## **Why did HIPAA come about?**

HIPAA originally was passed because of congressional concerns about the transferability and portability of employees' health coverage. The HIPAA issues that we are currently facing pertain to the transmission of health care information in electronic form as well as maintaining the security and privacy of health care information. As the health care industry utilized electronic data interchange (EDI) on a more widespread basis, it realized that the health care system overall was not reaching the efficiencies that should have resulted from this technological advance. In order to increase the efficiency, effectiveness, and cost savings through the use of electronic data interchange in the health care industry, Congress passed legislation that requires all health care providers, health care clearinghouses, and health plans to implement and utilize standardized formats when transmitting electronic data. This standardization will ensure that all providers and health plans can transmit and receive health care information using the same formats, code sets, and data elements. This is a "behind the scenes" effort that requires software and system upgrades and adjustments. As a result of this increased use of electronic data interchange, Congress also realized that additional privacy and security measures would be required. Congress has mandated that health care providers implement

security measures to protect patient health care information that is stored and transmitted electronically, as well as implement additional safeguards to protect your health care information that is maintained on paper and other mediums

## **Why is HIPAA important to me?**

As a health care consumer, you should be concerned about the safeguarding and confidentiality of your personal health care information. Any information that your doctor receives or creates regarding your health, your health history, treatment, and payment activities is confidential and should be carefully protected. HIPAA requires your doctors to implement and document the safeguards, policies, and procedures that will protect your health care information. Under HIPAA you will exercise more control over the uses and disclosures of your health care information, and you will be afforded certain rights with respect to your health care information.

You may receive a Notice of Privacy Practices from your doctor and be asked to sign a form that acknowledges your receipt of this notice. This notice will describe how your doctor may use and disclose your health care information without your written permission, and will also discuss the rights that you have with respect to your health care information. If a use or disclosure of your health care information is not permitted by the privacy regulations, your doctor will be required to obtain your written authorization to disclose this health care information. This authorization will indicate the specific health care information to be disclosed, as well as to whom it will be disclosed. When you are asked to sign an authorization form, you should carefully review all of the information, as you are ultimately in control of the release of this information. If you have any questions or concerns about the information on the authorization form, you should discuss these with your doctor's privacy

officer. Third parties such as attorneys, insurance companies, or a prospective employer may also ask you to sign an authorization form allowing us to disclose specific information to them.

## **Will HIPAA impact my care?**

No. HIPAA will not impact the care you receive from your doctor. In enacting these rules and regulations, Congress made it very clear that under no circumstances should these rules interfere or impede the provision of health care. In an attempt to safeguard your health care information, your doctor will ensure that your health care information is not disclosed unless permitted by the regulations or expressly authorized by you. Your doctor will experience an increase in administrative tasks in implementing and adhering to these guidelines, but this will not impact the quality or timeliness of your care. In an effort to better protect your privacy, your doctor as well as the staff may address you by your first name only, both on the phone and in person. We hope that you are not offended by this.

## **Who will be enforcing the HIPAA regulations?**

Congress has delegated the management and enforcement of the HIPAA privacy, security, and transaction standards to the Department of Health and Human Services.

## **What if I have additional questions?**

Your doctor has a designated privacy officer who is in charge of implementing and managing the privacy plan. They are available to address the questions you may have. You may contact the privacy officer or write to them at this office. If you require a personal meeting, we suggest that you call ahead of time to set up an appointment.