

Optometry Coding & Billing Alert

Reader Question: Know How to Email Without Violating HIPAA

Question: I sometimes e-mail patient records to consultants for help on how to bill. How can I make sure I'm not committing a HIPAA violation?

Connecticut Subscriber

Answer: A simple request for help can land you in plenty of trouble with HIPAA. The key is to remove all identifying information from the report before you send it.

Here's how: Under HIPAA's Privacy Rule, you have to make sure you don't send protected health information (PHI) by removing all individually identifiable health information, including health information that reasonably allows individual identification. In general, HIPAA is based on reasonableness.

Best bet: Only send the portions of the report that describe the clinical procedure and findings, and include a confidentiality notice at the end of your e-mail. This guideline applies whether you send the e-mail from an office or from home.

Specifics: Before you send the report by e-mail, remove the patient's name and Social Security number. You should also remove geographic identifiers, dates, phone, fax, and e-mail information, and medical record and device serial numbers. Then you read through the report before you send it to be sure you can reasonably assume the patient is no longer identifiable.

Experts advise that for extra security, you send an encrypted email to keep information safe.