

So you've got some concerns about HIPAA!

By Jeanette Phillips, Clinic Receptionist

In healthcare, the word HIPAA gets tossed around frequently. It oftentimes gets misunderstood. So what is HIPAA?

The official description of HIPAA is Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996. It was designed to protect the privacy and security of personal medical information and to help improve the portability of health insurance coverage. According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, the HIPAA Privacy Rule is not intended to impede customary and essential communications or practices; it ensures confidentiality and security of every aspect of protected health information.

What, then, is considered Protected Health Information (PHI)? Any medical document that contains two identifiers, such as a patient's name and date of birth, would be considered PHI. This includes documents such as medical records, lab tests, or hospital bills because each of these documents contain a patient's name and/or other identifying information associated with the health data content. Personal names, residential addresses, or phone numbers, are not PHI. For example, if information is reported as part of a publicly accessible data source, such as a phone book, then this information would not be PHI because it is not related to health data. (HHS.gov)

A common question people ask is, "Why do Doctor's Offices or Hospitals always ask for my phone and address information when other people can hear? Isn't that HIPAA?" When you arrive at various Doctor's offices, clinics, or hospitals, it is likely that your address and phone information may be spoken in a way other patients can inadvertently hear. Verifying your address, phone number and insurance information ensures that your information is accurate in that Provider's

system. Although most clinics do try to say only a partial address or phone number for verification, rest assured that this is NOT HIPAA information.

Another common question is "Why do I have to tell the receptionist why I'm coming in? Can't other people overhear why I'm being seen and what my symptoms are?" The reason receptionists ask what the appointment is for, is for a couple reasons:

1) It gives the Receptionist information on how to schedule the most effective appointment with the appropriate amount of time with your Provider;

2) As your Provider prepares for his/her next day's appointments, it gives the Provider the information needed to be prepared for your appointment, as well as helps the nurse prep the room the day of your appointment. This way they know how to be as prepared and efficient as possible before you are seen.

If you feel uncomfortable saying aloud why you need to see a Provider, you may always ask for a paper/pen to write that information down. Keep in mind only minimal information is needed, such as, "I've had a stomach ache for several days," "It's a follow up appointment for my diabetes," "My ankle is hurting," etc. It is important to state the reason you are coming in so that ample time and attention can be given for your appointment.

When in doubt, or if you have any further concerns, we encourage you to contact Heather Dirks, our HIPAA Officer at 775-3153 or visit our website at www.fcphd.org.

HIPAA information taken from <https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/privacy/guidance/incidental-uses-and-disclosures/index.html>

Prior Hospital Happenings available at <http://www.fcphd.org/news.html>.

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