

## Consumer Empowerment Equals Consumer Involvement

Our government leaders are actively pursuing ways to involve patients as consumers in their own healthcare. Informed consumers will affect rising healthcare costs, improve patient safety, and be more likely to have better healthcare information.

Public empowerment is a category covering several breakthrough projects considered by the American Health Information Community (AHIC). AHIC was formed in October 2005 to help advance efforts for most Americans to have electronic health records within 10 years. AHIC defines a breakthrough project as “the use of health information technology that produces a tangible and specific value to the healthcare consumer and that can be realized within a two to three year period.”

One of the breakthrough projects is called My Personal Health Record. My Personal Health Record (PHR) is a way for individuals to track their own health status (or of those in their care). This breakthrough project is envisioned as a way to monitor routine health information as well as chronic disease status. There is value to you in maintaining your own PHR, either electronically, as encouraged by AHIC, or on paper as many individuals do currently. You can have ready access to your medication history as well as allergies, and can offer this access to your healthcare provider. A health record for senior citizens could help coordinate the information needed by healthcare providers, family care givers, and institutions, making it possible for them to live more independently.

There are several types of PHRs available. The simplest is one kept in paper format by the patient. It might consist of a list of medications, copies of hospital and physician office reports and patient tracking of such healthcare status such as blood sugar or blood pressure. A good place to start a PHR in paper format is found at [www.MyPhr.com](http://www.MyPhr.com) where there are sample forms for consumers to download free of charge.

Another type of PHR is one offered by the consumer’s employer, healthcare provider or insurance company. It might be forms or software that you download to your computer or it could be a Web-based application that you would use online.

An electronic PHR offered by a healthcare provider or an insurance company will likely need to meet the HIPAA Privacy and Security regulations. You will want to ask questions such as, how is the data accessed by healthcare providers who provide care? Can the PHR track who accessed the information? Are there adequate online security controls (encryption, firewalls, virus protection)?

A second example is the employer-sponsored PHR. It may or may not need to comply with the HIPAA regulations, but it should have good privacy and security controls if it is electronic. You should ask your employer if the information is used for any reason outside the care of the patient, and if so, how?

A third example is a stand-alone product from a vendor. A vendor who is not a covered entity as defined by the HIPAA regulations is not required to comply with the regulations. Most independent vendors with stand-alone products fall in this category. These products usually require a fee, and might range from downloadable forms to a Web-based, interactive product. The informed consumer will evaluate the product by its ease of use and, its usefulness to the patient and his care provider, and ask the same questions about privacy and security you would ask a HIPAA covered entity. For electronic PHRs, look for policies on encryption, firewalls, and virus protection. Ask about audit controls and disaster recovery plans. Ask if the data is used by the vendor in any way outside of the use by the patient.

For more information on the PHR or PHR products, go to [www.MyPHR.com](http://www.MyPHR.com), an AHIMA-sponsored Web site designed to help get you started.

## Quiz

1. The benefits of a Personal Health Record include:
  - a. Improved patient safety
  - b. Better healthcare information
  - c. More informed consumers
  - d. All of the above
2. AHIC encourages the use of an electronic PHR
  - a. True
  - b. False
3. An electronic PHR should be able to track anyone who has accessed it.
  - a. True
  - b. False
4. A PHR provided by an independent vendor does not need to have policies on privacy and security.
  - a. True
  - b. False
5. Employers who offer a PHR should have policies regarding use of the employees’ data outside the care of the employee.
  - a. True
  - b. False