

# HIPAA Privacy Rule and Sharing Information Related to Mental Health

## Background

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act

# Questions and Answers about HIPAA and Mental Health

In situations where the patient is given the opportunity and does not object, HIPAA allows the provider to share or discuss the patient's mental health information with family members or other persons involved in the patient's care or payment for care. For example, if the patient does not object:

- x A psychiatrist may discuss the drugs a patient needs to take with the patient's sister who is present with the patient at a mental health care appointment.
- x A therapist may give information to a patient's spouse about warning signs that may signal a developing emergency.

BUT:

- x A nurse may not discuss a patient's mental health condition with the patient's brother after the patient has stated she does not want her family to know about her condition.

In all cases, the health care provider may share or discuss only the information that the person involved needs to know about the patient's care or payment for care. See 45 CFR 164.510(b). Finally, it is important to remember that other applicable law (e.g., State confidentiality statutes) or professional ethics may impose stricter limitations on sharing personal health information, particularly where the information relates to a patient's mental health.

**When does mental illness or another mental condition constitute incapacity under the Privacy Rule? For example, what if a patient who is experiencing temporary psychosis or is intoxicated does not have the capacity to agree or object to a health care provider sharing information with a family member, but the provider believes the disclosure is in the patient's best interests?**

Section 164.510(b)(3) of the HIPAA Privacy Rule permits a health care provider, when a patient is not present or is unable to agree or object to a disclosure due to incapacity or emergency circumstances, to determine whether disclosing a patient's information to the patient's family, friends, or other persons involved in the patient's care or payment for care, is in the best interests of the patient.<sup>1</sup> Where a provider determines that such a disclosure is in the patient's best interests, the provider would be permitted to disclose only the PHI that is directly relevant to the person's involvement in the patient's care or payment for care.

This permission clearly applies where a patient is unconscious. However, there may be additional situations in which a health care provider believes, based on professional judgment, that the patient does not have the capacity to agree or object to the sharing of personal health information at a particular time and that sharing the information is in the best interests of the patient at that time. These may include circumstances in which a patient is suffering from temporary psychosis or is under the influence of drugs or alcohol. If, for example, the provider believes the patient cannot meaningfully agree or object to the sharing of the patient's information with family, friends, or other persons involved in their care due to her current mental state, the provider is allowed to discuss the patient's condition or treatment with a family member, if the provider believes it would be in the patient's best interests. In making this determination about the patient's best interests, the provider should take into account the patient's prior expressed preferences regarding disclosures of their information, if any, as well as the circumstances of the current situation. Once the patient regains the capacity to make these choices for herself, the provider should offer the patient the opportunity to agree or object to any future sharing of her information.

Note 1: The Privacy Rule permits, but does not require, providers to disclose information in these situations. Providers who are subject to more stringent privacy standards under other laws, such as certain state confidentiality laws or 42 CFR Part 2, would need to consider whether there is a similar disclosure permission under those laws that would apply in the circumstances.

## If a health care provider knows that a patient with a serious mental illness has stopped taking a prescribed medication, can the provider provide the patient's family members?

So long as the patient does not object, HIPAA allows the provider to share or discuss a patient's mental health information with the patient's family members. See 45 CFR 164.510(b). If the provider believes, based on professional judgment, that the patient does not have the capacity to agree or object to sharing the information at that time, and that sharing the information would be in the patient's best interests, the provider may tell the patient's family member. In either case, the health care provider may share or discuss only the information that the family member involved needs to know about the patient's care or payment for care.

Otherwise, if the patient has capacity and objects to the provider sharing information with the patient's family member, the provider may only share the information if doing so is consistent with applicable law and standards of ethical conduct, and the provider has a good faith belief that the patient poses a threat to the health or safety of the patient or others, and the family member is reasonably able to prevent or lessen that threat. See 45 CFR 164.512(j). For example, if a doctor knows from experience that, when a patient's medication is not at a therapeutic level, the patient is at high risk of committing suicide, the doctor may believe in good faith that disclosure is necessary to prevent or lessen the threat of harm to the health or safety of the patient who has stopped taking the prescribed medication, and may share information with the patient's family or other caregivers who can avert the threat. However, absent a good faith belief that the disclosure is necessary to prevent a serious and imminent threat to the health or safety of the patient or others, the doctor must respect the wishes of the patient with respect to the disclosure.

## Can a minor child's doctor talk to the child's parent about the patient's mental health status and needs?

With respect to general treatment situations, a parent, guardian, or other person acting in loco parentis usually is the personal representative of the minor child, and a health care provider is permitted to share patient information with a patient's personal representative under the Privacy Rule. However, section 164.502(g) of the Privacy Rule contains several important exceptions to this general rule. A parent is not treated as a minor child's personal representative when: (1) State or other law does not require the consent of a parent or other person before a minor can obtain a particular health care service, the minor consents to the health care service, and the minor child has not requested the parent be treated as a personal representative; (2) someone other than the parent is authorized by law to consent to the provision of a particular health service to a minor and provides such consent; or (3) a parent agrees to a confidential relationship between the minor and a health care provider with respect to the health care service.<sup>2</sup> For example, if State law provides an adolescent the right to obtain mental health treatment without parental consent, and the adolescent consents to such treatment, the parent would not be the personal representative of the adolescent with respect to that mental health treatment information.

Regardless, however, of whether the parent is otherwise considered a personal representative, the Privacy Rule defers to State or other applicable laws that expressly address the ability of the parent to obtain health

federally-funded drug and alcohol abuse treatment programs contain provisions that are more stringent than HIPAA. See 42 USC § 290dd-2; 42 CFR 2.11, et. seq.

Note 2: A parent also may not be a personal representative if there are safety concerns. A provider may decide not to treat the parent as the minor's personal representative if the provider believes that the minor has been or may be subject to violence, abuse, or neglect by the parent or the minor may be endangered by treating the parent as the personal representative; and the provider determines, in the exercise of professional judgment, that it is not in the best interests of the patient to treat the parent as the personal representative. See 45 CFR 164.502(g)(5).

**At what age of a child is the parent no longer the personal representative of the child for HIPAA purposes?**

HIPAA defers to state law to determine the age of majority and the rights of parents to act for a child in making health care decisions, and thus, the ability of the parent to act as the personal representative of the child for HIPAA purposes. See 45 CFR 164.502(g).

**Does a parent have a right to receive a copy of psychotherapy notes about a child's mental health treatment?**

No.

patient's right of access to protected health information gives family members the ability to disclose relevant safety information with health care providers without fear of disrupting the family's relationship with the patient.

## Does HIPAA permit a doctor to contact a patient's family or law enforcement if the doctor believes that the patient might hurt herself or someone else?

Yes. The Privacy Rule permits a health care provider to disclose necessary information about a patient to law enforcement, family members of the patient, or other persons, when the provider believes the patient presents a serious and imminent threat to self or others. The scope of this permission is described in a [letter to the nation's health care providers - PDF](#)

Specifically, when a health care provider believes in good faith that such a warning is necessary to prevent or lessen a serious and imminent threat to the health or safety of the patient or others, the Privacy Rule allows the provider, consistent with applicable law and standards of ethical conduct, to alert those persons whom the provider believes are reasonably able to prevent or lessen the threat. These provisions may be found in the Privacy Rule at 45 CFR § 164.512(j).

Under these provisions, a health care provider may disclose patient information, including information from mental health records, if necessary, to law enforcement, family members of the patient, or any other persons who may reasonably be able to prevent or lessen the risk of harm. For example, if a mental health professional has a patient who has made a credible threat to inflict serious and imminent bodily harm on one or more persons, HIPAA permits the mental health professional to alert the police, a parent or other family member, school administrators or campus police, and others who may be able to intervene to avert harm from the threat.

In addition to professional ethical standards, most States have laws and/or court decisions which address, and in many instances require, disclosure of patient information to prevent or lessen the risk of harm. Providers should consult the laws applicable to their profession in the States where they practice, as well as 42 USC 290dd-2 and 42 CFR Part 2 under Federal law (governing the disclosure of alcohol and drug abuse treatment records) to understand their duties and authority in situations where they have information indicating a threat to public safety. Note that, where a provider is not subject to such State laws or other ethical standards, the HIPAA permission still would allow disclosures for these purposes to the extent the other conditions of the permission are met.

## If a law enforcement officer brings a patient to a hospital or other mental health facility to be placed on a temporary psychiatric hold, and requests to be notified if or when the patient is released, can the facility make that notification?

The Privacy Rule permits a HIPAA covered entity, such as a hospital, to disclose certain protected health information, including the date and time of admission and discharge, in response to a law enforcement official's request, for the purpose of locating or identifying a suspect, fugitive, material witness, or missing person. See 45 CFR § 164.512(f)(2). Under this provision, a covered entity may disclose the following information about an individual: name and address; date and place of birth; social security number; blood type and rh factor; type of injury; date and time of treatment (includes date and time of admission and discharge) or death; and a

the Privacy Rule would permit such disclosures of protected health information as “required-by-law” disclosures. See 45 CFR § 164.512(a).

Finally, the Privacy Rule permits a covered health care provider, such as a hospital, to disclose a patient’s protected health information, consistent with applicable legal and ethical standards, to avert a serious and imminent threat to the health or safety of the patient or others. Such disclosures may be to law enforcement authorities or any other persons, such as family members, who are able to prevent or lessen the threat. See 45 CFR § 164.512(j).

## **If a doctor believes that a patient might hurt himself or herself or someone else, is it the duty of the provider to notify the family or law enforcement authorities?**

A health care provider’s “duty to warn” generally is derived from and defined by standards of ethical conduct and State laws and court decisions such as *Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California*. HIPAA permits a covered health care provider to notify a patient’s family members of a serious and imminent threat to the health or safety of the patient or others if those family members are in a position to lessen or avert the threat. Thus, to the extent that a provider determines that there is a serious and imminent threat of a patient physically harming self or others, HIPAA would permit the provider to warn the appropriate person(s) of the threat, consistent with his or her professional ethical obligations and State law requirements. See 45 CFR 164.512(j). In addition, even where danger is not imminent, HIPAA permits a covered provider to communicate with a patient’s family members, or others involved in the patient’s care, to be on watch or ensure compliance with medication regimens, as long as the patient has been provided an opportunity to agree or object to the disclosure and no objection has been made. See 45 CFR 164.510(b)(2).

## **Does HIPAA prevent a school administrator, or a school doctor or nurse, from sharing concerns about a student’s mental health with the student’s parents or law**

Generally, yes. If a health care power of attorney is currently in effect, the named person would be the patient's personal representative (The period of effectiveness may depend on the type of power of attorney: Some health care power of attorney documents are effective immediately, while others are only triggered if and when the patient lacks the capacity to make health care decisions and then cease to be effective if and when the patient regains such capacity).

"Personal representatives," as defined by HIPAA, are those persons who have authority, under applicable law, to make health care decisions for a patient. HIPAA provides a personal representative of a patient with the same rights to access health information as the patient, including the right to request a complete medical record containing mental health information. The patient's right of access has some exceptions, which would also apply to a personal representative. For example, with respect to mental health information, a psychotherapist's separate notes of counseling sessions, kept separately from the patient chart, are not included in the HIPAA right of access.

Additionally, a provider may d

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determine, based on the exercise of professional judgment, that notification and disclosure of PHI to someone previously involved in their care is in the patient's best interests. For example, if a patient who is addicted to opioids misses important medical appointments without any explanation, a primary health care provider at a general practice may believe that there is an emergency related to the opioid addiction and under the circumstances, may use professional judgment to determine that it is in the patient's best interests to reach out to emergency contacts, such as parents or family, and inform them of the situation. See 45 CFR 164.510(b)(3).

If the patient is deceased, a doctor may disclose information related to the family member's, friend's, or caregiver's involvement with the patient's care, unless doing so is inconsistent with any prior expressed preference of the patient that is known to the doctor. If the person who will receive notification is the patient's personal representative, that person has a right to request and obtain any information about the patient that the patient could obtain, including a complete medical record, under the HIPAA right of access. See 45 CFR 164.524.

When a patient poses a serious and imminent threat to his own or someone else's health or safety, HIPAA permits a health care professional to share the necessary information about the patient with anyone who is in a position to prevent or lessen the threatened harm—including family, friends, and caregivers—without the patient's permission. See 45 CFR 164.512(j). HIPAA expressly defers to the professional judgment of health care professionals when they make determinations about the nature and severity of the threat to health or safety. See 45 CFR 164.512(j)(4). Specifically, HIPAA presumes the health care professional is acting in good faith in making this determination, if the professional relies on his or her actual knowledge or on credible information from another person who has knowledge or authority. For example, a doctor whose patient has overdosed on opioids is presumed to have complied with HIPAA if, based on talking with or observing the patient, the doctor determines that the patient poses a serious and imminent threat to his or her own health. Even when HIPAA permits this disclosure, however, the disclosure must be consistent with applicable state law and standards of ethical conduct. HIPAA does not preempt any state law or professional ethics standards that would prevent a health care professional from sharing protected health information in the circumstances described here. For example, the doctor in this situation still may be subject to a state law that prohibits sharing information related to mental health or a substance use disorder without the patient's consent in all circumstances, even if HIPAA would permit the disclosure.

For more information see OCR's guidance, *How HIPAA Allows Doctors to Respond to the Opioid Crisis*, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/hipaa-opioid-crisis.pdf>

## When does HIPAA allow a hospital to notify an individual's family, friends, or caregivers that a patient who has been hospitalized for a psychiatric hold has been admitted or discharged?

Hospitals may notify family, friends, or caregivers of a patient in several circumstances:

- x **When the patient has a personal representative**

A hospital may notify a patient's personal representative about their admission or discharge and share other PHI with the personal representative without limitation. However, a hospital is permitted to refuse to treat a person as a personal representative if there are safety concerns associated with providing the information to the person, or if a health care professional determines that disclosure is not in the patient's best interest.

- x **When the patient agrees or does not object to family involvement**

A hospital may notify a patient's family, friends, or caregivers if the patient agrees, or doesn't object, or if a health care professional is able to infer from the surrounding circumstances, using professional judgment that the patient does not object. This includes when a patient's family, friends, or caregivers have been involved in the patient's health care in the past, and the individual did not object.

- x **When the patient becomes unable to agree or object and there has already been family involvement**

When a patient is not present or cannot agree or object because of some incapacity or emergency, a health care provider may share relevant information about the patient with family, friends, or others involved in the patient's care or payment for care if the health care provider determines, based on professional judgment, that doing so is

1. Given that the patient is no longer present, if the therapist determines, based on professional judgment, that there may be an emergency situation and that contacting the family member of the absent patient is in the patient's best interests; or
2. If the disclosure is needed to lessen a serious and imminent threat and the family member is in a position to avert or lessen the threat.

In making the determination about the patient's best interests, the provider may take into account the patient's prior expressed preferences regarding disclosures of their information, if any, as well as the circumstances of

For example, HIPAA permits disclosure of protected health information (PHI) for treatment purposes (including in emergencies) without patient authorization,