

## **HOW DOES HIPAA PROTECT PATIENTS?**

HIPAA protects a patient's privacy by limiting how health plans, pharmacies, hospitals, and other health care providers can use the patient's personal medical information. Key provisions include:

- **Access To Medical Records** Patients can generally obtain copies of their medical records within 30 days of requesting copies (though there may be a charge for the cost of copying and mailing the records) and may ask for corrections if there are mistakes.
- **Notice of Privacy Practices** Health plans, doctors, and other health care providers must notify patients of how their personal medical information will be used. This is generally provided on the patient's first visit to a doctor, upon enrolling in a health plan, or upon request.
- **Limits on Use of Personal Health Information** Health plans and health care providers are limited in how they may use personal health information. To promote the best quality of care for patients, doctors, nurses and other health care providers may share information when it is needed to treat patients. Only the minimum amount of protected information needed for a particular purpose can be shared. Also, personal health information usually may not be used for purposes that are not related to health care. For example, patients would have to sign an authorization before medical information could be released to a life insurer, a bank, or a marketing firm.
- **Confidential Communications** Patients can request that their doctors, health plans and other health care providers take reasonable steps to ensure that communications with patients are confidential. For example, a patient could ask a doctor to call the patient's office rather than home in order to discuss health information.
- **Complaints** Patients may file a formal complaint regarding a health plan's or provider's privacy practices. Complaints can be made directly to the provider or health plan, or to the Office for Civil Rights which investigates complaints and enforces privacy regulations by calling (866) 627-7748.

Source: *Protecting the Privacy of Patients' Health Information*, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services