

Electronic Communication

May I leave a message regarding a patient's care on their home or cellular voicemail?

The short answer is yes. The HIPAA Privacy Rule permits healthcare providers to communicate with patients using all available media, including voicemail, cellphones and the Internet. Unfortunately, HIPAA doesn't provide specific guidance on what content you may leave, or where. A good rule of thumb, however, is to use reasonable care to safeguard the patient's privacy by disclosing only the information necessary to prompt them to respond appropriately. So, if you're confirming an appointment, just leave the date, time and place. If you're reporting a test result, then leave a message to call the practice back.

Figuring out how to best serve the patient's interests is, as always, crucial. In voicemail terms, that means not startling the patient with an indiscrete message that includes sensitive information. Of course, you can best avoid surprising the patient by obtaining their express, written consent to communicate through whichever means, including voicemail.

An unasked but related question is whether you may leave a message with a family member or other person. As with voicemails, the answer is yes, so long as you disclose only the information necessary to prompt the patient to respond, and not more. Discretion is the key.

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