

E-Mail Advice

We're thinking about using e-mail to answer simple medical questions. What issues should we consider?

E-mail nowadays is an efficient and viable means of communication between doctor and patient. Because of the nature of the medium, however, several risk management concerns must be considered:

- The apparently informal quality of e-mail can be misleading. When communicating with a healthcare provider, patients rightly expect (whether they realize it or not) an appropriate level of decorum. An innocent humorous message later viewed out of context (like by a jury) may appear to be impolite or indifferent. All messages should thus reflect an appropriately respectful tone.
- Since even deleted messages are retrievable, every e-mail should be viewed as, and made a part of, the medical record. That means printing and filing all messages in the chart.
- Prompt receipt and response to messages cannot be presumed. Even though e-mail communication may look spontaneous, messages may sit unread for hours and even days. Therefore, information that is at all urgent should always be conveyed through more immediate means.
- Patient confidentiality should not automatically be assumed. Physicians who communicate by e-mail must use reasonable care to safeguard patient information. In Internet terms, that means appropriately using firewalls, passwords, and sometimes encryption.
- Clinical accuracy cannot be assumed. Put another way, even sophisticated, Internet-savvy patients sometimes have difficulty accurately describing their symptoms. Physicians should, therefore, always err on the side of caution and bring patients in to personally examine them.

E-mail communication with patients is a reality, so it cannot be ignored. Regardless, it should be used carefully to yield the greatest patient benefit with the least amount of risk.

The risk management advice presented in this Site is intended as general information of interest to physicians and other healthcare professionals. The recommendations and advice published on this Site do not reflect or establish a standard of care and do not establish rules for the practice of medicine. The publication of this information is not intended as an offer to insure such conditions or exposures, or to indicate that MAG Mutual Insurance Company will underwrite such risks for the reader. Our liability is limited to the specific written terms and conditions of actual insurance policies issued.
