

For what purposes do public health agencies use patient health data?

Public health agencies serve as the backbone of our population health system, working to determine the causes of, and prevent and respond to, injury and disease in our communities. Public health officials often need to obtain, use, and exchange patient health data to perform important public health functions, such as:

- Conducting surveillance and obtaining reports of disease for early detection of a disease outbreak or other threats to the public's health;
- Updating and analyzing public health registries that track injury and disease;
- Investigating and responding to public health emergencies, such as disease outbreaks, natural disasters, and acts of terrorism;
- Collecting and analyzing medical information, specimens, environmental samples, and other information through the course of an investigation to determine the source and nature of the threat;
- Sharing information among public health agencies, with law enforcement, health care providers and other stakeholders for injury and disease prevention, investigation and response;
- Contacting individuals who may have been exposed to a communicable disease or who may be at risk for contracting or spreading a disease or condition, and conducting follow-up to contain the spread of disease and ensure treatment;
- Alerting healthcare providers, patients and the general public about public health threats, and providing information necessary to keep the public informed and coordinate response;
- Collecting post-incident data to measure, evaluate, and improve surveillance, preparedness, and response;
- Determining and evaluating community needs and resources for planning, response and recovery; and
- Conducting public health research designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge about injury, disease, and other public health issues.¹

In some cases, public health agencies are able to use de-identified patient data to carry out their research and activities, which does not generally raise concerns about patient privacy. However, in many instances, such as investigating the cause of a communicable disease outbreak and identifying individuals who may have contracted or been exposed to the disease, it is often essential for public health authorities to have access to an individual's protected health information (PHI).

Recognizing this need, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) strikes a balance between public health and patient privacy by permitting covered entities (such as healthcare providers) to disclose a patient's protected health information (PHI) to public health authorities, or other entities that are legally authorized to collect or receive such information, for the purpose of preventing or controlling disease, injury, or disability.² At the same time, state laws provide varying degrees of protection for PHI that is collected through public health activities, generally designating such information as confidential and outlining limits of sharing and use.

For more information on state and federal laws related to privacy, see www.healthinfo.org/topics/63.

For more information on state and federal laws related to public health data collection and reporting, see <http://www.healthinfo.org/topics/67>.

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¹ Association for State and Territorial Health Officials. 2012. Public Health Collection, Use, Sharing, and Protection of Information Issue Brief. Available at <http://www.astho.org/Programs/Preparedness/Public-Health-Emergency-Law/Public-Health-and-Information-Sharing-Toolkit/Collection-Use-Sharing-and-Protection-Issue-Brief/>.

² 45 C.F.R. 164.512(b)(i) (2013).

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