



# Organize Your Health Records

Are your family's files a total mess?  
Go paperless. Our guide will simplify  
the process. *by* JEANNETTE MONINGER

Moms wear many medical hats. We nurse colds and fevers, bandage scraped knees, kiss boo-boos, and treat ear infections, strep throats, and stomach bugs. We're also expected to keep tabs on everyone's medications, height and weight, allergies, and doctor visits. It's a huge undertaking, which is why your current record-keeping system probably looks something like this: a manila folder bulging with scribbled doctor notes, insurance statements, copay receipts, and appointment reminders. Worse, the really important stuff—like your child's immunization records—may be out of date or missing.

But there's an easy-to-implement solution: personal health records (PHRs). These Web-based tools allow you to collect and track health information via your computer, smartphone, or tablet. You can also grant partial or full access to others, which is helpful if you and your partner (or a grandparent) switch off on your kids' wellness visits. "Having the ability to call up your family's medical information anytime, anywhere makes health care safer and more efficient," says Mark Del Beccaro, M.D., chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics' council on clinical information technology.

PHRs combine records from doctors, labs, hospitals, and pharmacies with your own notes, observations, questions, and wellness goals. Got a child who's under the weather? With a few finger taps, you can track changes in her temperature, symptoms, sleep patterns, and meds and then call up or print out the data to share with her pediatrician. In an emergency, it's easy to blank on the

simple stuff (such as the name of an antibiotic your child is allergic to), but a PHR eliminates the panic. It's especially useful if you or your child needs care when you're traveling or if your area experiences a natural disaster. "If your area loses power, your doctor may not be available to provide the date of your child's last tetanus shot or the names of drugs he's prescribed," says Glen Stream, M.D., chairman of the board of the American Association of Family Physicians. "But with a PHR, you'll be all set."

Although gathering all the necessary data to compile your family's PHR takes time, you don't need to tackle it all at once. Instead, try working on a different person's records each month. Once everyone's info is current and complete, updating it will be a snap.

### STEP 1

#### choose a platform

Web-based systems are the best way to go for instant data access. The two leading PHRs, Microsoft HealthVault and WebMD Health Manager (both are free), have the capability to link with most hospitals, doctors' offices, labs, and pharmacies. Using your health plan's PHR can be a time-saver because key information (such as the date of last appointment and new prescriptions) is automatically added. However, you can't transfer the data if the insurance provider changes. You can find a list of PHRs at myPHR.com. Before choosing one, read the company's privacy policy to make sure that it encrypts personal data, cautions Dr. Stream. Even then you need to be careful; these systems are as vulnerable to hacking as online bank

and credit-card accounts. Since PHRs may contain confidential information, including your family's Social Security numbers (some insurers still use them for identification purposes), home address, and sensitive medical diagnoses, it's important to use a difficult-to-guess user name and password and avoid sharing it.

### STEP 2

#### gather medical records

You'll need to collect and type in or scan the past two years of medical information for you, your partner, and your children. "You should go back farther for immunization records or if someone has a chronic condition that has required a lot of testing, medications, or hospitalizations," recommends Lou Ann Wiedemann, director of professional-practice resources for the nonprofit American Health Information Management Association. You have the right to obtain virtually all of your and your kids' health information within 30 days, thanks to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. However, there are some exceptions to this rule, so be sure to check with a health-information-management professional or your provider.

Begin the process by submitting medical-record release forms to your primary-care physicians, pediatrician, ob-gyn, dentist, specialists, and hospitals you've been treated at. Many medical offices post these forms online. Otherwise, draft a letter asking to have them mailed or faxed to you (find a sample at [privacyrights.org](http://privacyrights.org)). A doctor cannot deny you a copy of your medical records, even if you haven't paid for the services rendered. However, he is allowed to charge you reasonable costs for copying and mailing the records (some physicians may choose to provide this service for free). If the doctor has an electronic health record, the patient must still provide authorization prior to the

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sharing of information. “Because of security concerns and personal-health-information laws, many doctors won’t e-mail records,” says Marie Savard, M.D., coauthor of *How to Save Your Own Life: The Eight Steps Only You Can Take to Manage and Control Your Health*. (To find out more about your state’s laws, visit Georgetown University’s Center on Medical Record Rights and Privacy at [hpi.georgetown.edu/privacy/records.html](http://hpi.georgetown.edu/privacy/records.html).) Make sure you receive this key information for each family member:

- Dates of immunizations
- Blood typing
- Lab results, such as cholesterol and blood-pressure readings, Pap smears, and mammograms
- Results of recent checkups, including height, weight, and body mass index (BMI). Also include children’s growth-chart percentiles.
- List of chronic health conditions (such as asthma, ADHD, and diabetes), including treatments, prescription names, and dosages
- Allergies and sensitivities to medications, foods, and materials
- History of hospitalizations (which the hospital’s medical-records department can provide)

### STEP 3

#### compile personal info

Each family member’s PHR should also include:

- Name, birth date, and contact information (address, e-mail, and home- and cell-phone numbers)

- Emergency-contact information
- Phone numbers for the primary-care physician, dentist, eye doctor, and any other specialists
- Insurance information, including the member ID, group number, copay amount, primary-care physician’s phone number and address, and contact information for the health-care provider
- Daily medications (both prescription and OTC) and supplements, including dosages, frequency, and reason for taking
- Family history of physical and mental-health conditions. Include parent and sibling information as well as close relatives with notable, inheritable illnesses (i.e., an aunt who had breast cancer).
- Summaries and links to critical health documents for adults, such as living wills, medical power-of-attorney forms, and organ-donor authorizations

### STEP 4

#### update regularly

An outdated PHR is of no use to you or your doctor, so set aside a few minutes to input new data after each appointment. Ask the office to send results and any notes directly to your PHR (if it has the capability) or your e-mail. That way, you’ll always have the key elements of your family’s medical history accessible, and your kids will have an excellent head start when they take charge of their own health-care records.

### A KEY ID FOR YOUR WALLET

Even if you have a PHR, you and your spouse should carry medical ID cards—which list emergency-contact information, the primary doctor’s name and number, and medical conditions—for every family member.

Create your own at [parents.com/medical-card](http://parents.com/medical-card). Don’t forget to update it whenever any information changes.