

## **Personal Health Records Satisfy Many Needs**

We are all different. Whether it is where we are in our lives, or there are different things wrong with us, or there is something else that is important, having built-in flexibility is important when creating and maintaining a Personal Health Record (PHR). This is particularly true when we are parents addressing needs of small children or acting on behalf of our own parents when they have lost the ability to care for themselves. There are things that we each can do to bring additional value and extend the capabilities of the PHR software that we use.

This brief paper is designed to provide ideas that we hope will be helpful in using a PHR more effectively on your behalf and that of others. We believe that it will also give a better understanding and appreciation of PHRs. For starters, PHR's serve as wonderful reminders, especially when considerable time has elapsed since a particular event. As we proceed, we will look at things from the perspective of different age and interest groups and the importance to each of them.

In any event, please keep in mind that healthcare providers are not likely to keep your records forever. They will follow retention policies and will only do what they are required to do. Medical practices go out of business and storms and floods take their toll especially when paper records are not backed up elsewhere. Years after an event you may not care about insignificant details, but it may be important to know basic facts. Your PHR may prove to be your only reminder. They can be equally important when traveling in faraway places and foreign lands and in emergencies when time is of the essence.

The following categories are designed to serve as a guide, but will likely not apply perfectly to everyone.

### ***Things that are Applicable to Most People and Age Groups***

It is important to document factors and circumstances that are expected to have a bearing on health and fitness. Items to consider are:

- Allergies, illnesses, injuries and chronic conditions. Be sure to make notations regarding diagnosis, severity and treatments.
- Medications, diets, tests and treatments. In particular, medications and things that are consumed can interact and have side effects that need to be recognized. Many things have both positive and negative consequences, especially when used in combination. Patients need to be especially concerned about over-the-counter medications that are used and treatments that are outside of normal healthcare programs. An example is flu vaccinations obtained from community service organizations.
- Environmental factors. Where people live, where they work, where they travel, chemicals they are exposed to, insect bites, food preservatives, cooking utensils, food and water storage containers, and a growing list of other things will have a cumulative effect and will likely cause a variety of ailments at one time or another. Recognizing and remembering what has been encountered will help to anticipate and look for issues requiring treatment when concerns are reported in the media.

### ***Family and Ethnic Differences***

Look out for and treat diseases that run in families and ethnic groups.

### ***Infants and Preschoolers***

Although some parents may want to record routine events during pregnancy, it is especially important to recognize and note extenuating circumstances. For example, during child birth, include such things as prolonged labor, and the need for C-sections. Later on, a PHR is especially valuable to keep track of immunizations and illnesses and to make note of comments by doctors. (For example, a doctor questioned whether the small children a babysitter cares for had been inoculated against chickenpox before she herself could be given shingles vaccine. The mother used the children's PHRs to provide the answer that was needed.) It is good to get in the habit of tracking and monitoring vital signs to avoid problems such as obesity. Serious conditions can have their roots in early years. Therefore, it is a good idea to record heights, weights, ages and corresponding quartiles. Also, record illnesses that are normally not regularly reported to the doctor. Keep in mind, data can be useful in answering school questionnaires.

### ***K-12 and Adolescents***

During school and formative years, occasional illnesses and injuries can be expected. Regular checkups are important. Things that happen can have a bearing on conditions experienced later in life. Notes that are taken may be useful for troubleshooting later on.

### ***College, Jobs and Young Adults***

By their early 30s, people probably start to realize that they no longer have the stamina of a teenager and that they need to take better care of themselves. This is especially true when there are others in their lives that depend upon them. Entering the adult world involves assuming a growing number of responsibilities. These include healthcare, a complex subject, involving a large number of providers. A PHR comes in handy as a management tool. Throughout every period in a person's life it is important to record data that seems pertinent, will likely be needed later, and could be useful in uncovering adverse trends. Having a PHR helps to manage details and improve the chances for positive outcomes and a long, healthy life. They can help to spot warning signs of illnesses that need to be treated promptly to avoid more serious consequences.

### ***Parenting and Middle-age***

By this stage of life, a person should be skilled in maintaining and using their own PHR to manage the healthcare services that they receive. They should also be ready to begin records for children.

### ***Empty-nesters and Pre-retirement***

As people become grandparents and start thinking about retirement, preparation is also important to assure that caring for parents will be successful as they become less self-sufficient. It is especially important for caregivers to have access to personal health records.

### ***Senior Citizens and Retirees***

As a person ages, the more health issues they will likely have to manage. There will be more things that they will have forgotten, and they will wish that they had started their PHR sooner. This is especially true when they realize that someone else may need to manage their care and will need their PHR.

### ***The Elderly and Infirm***

It is never too late to start a PHR. However, at this stage in life, it is more likely that the task will fall on the shoulders of a son or daughter. When they assume responsibility for a parent, they will need to refer to a Personal Health Record to be able to talk intelligently to professional caregivers. Therefore, it is better for everyone to have an established PHR before they can no longer manage their own care.

Many people will not have the advantage of having parents to start a PHR for them when they are born. In fact, at this time, many people will need to play catch-up, sometimes much later in life. This is not altogether bad as considerable detail can accumulate in a person's record during their lifetime. Information that was collected a long time ago, can usually be reviewed and details that are no longer needed, deleted. However, one thing is certain, organizations have retention policies, and few if any, will keep all of your information forever. So, responsible individuals keep records for themselves.

Not everyone will want to keep extensive granular detail. There is a proper balance between having too much and not enough information. Everyone needs to pick a comfort level that is right for them. Until someone else needs to take over affairs for them, even a few cryptic notes may be sufficient to jog someone's memory. However, in emergency situations, having a complete picture could prove absolutely essential. These are considerations that are important to think about. Please do not hesitate to ask for help. Talk things over with family members. Then contact us.

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## **Attachment – Use a Personal Health Record (PHR) to help manage the care of a family member.**

My mother-in-law has been living in a progressive living community for nearly 10 years since my father-in-law passed away. She started in a three room apartment. Six years ago, she broke a hip and was hospitalized and sent to rehab before returning to her apartment. Three years ago, it was decided that she was no longer suited to independent living and was transferred to “assisted living.” This worked out reasonably well until two months ago, when she broke her second hip. After being hospitalized for nearly a week, she was transferred to one of the skilled care facilities that serve her community.

A week ago, my wife and I had a meeting with staff members at the facility. The meeting involved a discussion of the various options that are available for her further care. When she was released from the hospital, there was no room for her in the skilled care unit that is associated with her assisted living residence. She was moved into temporary space, became number 15 on a waiting list and has since moved up to number four. The question is whether to close out her room in assisted living and make a permanent move to the skilled care unit when it becomes available.

As much as we hate to see our last parent, who recently became 92 years old, need to downsize one last time to a semi private room in skilled care, we believe that it is probably the right thing to do. Our only reservation is that there are issues with medications resulting from all of the different handoffs that have taken place from one facility to the next. For example, one medication that was taken for many, many years was abruptly stopped because it was accidentally left off of a report. Could things like this be causing memory loss and confusion?

This was one thing that we caught. Unfortunately, my mother-in-law does not have a PHR so my wife and I are forced to rely on our incomplete memories to help her. Hopefully catching one thing will make the nursing staff more cautious and careful, but how much better it would have been if only we had had a PHR to remind us about things. In this case, things that occurred years ago, before the start of her residence in the progressive community, have been of interest to the nursing staff. Provider records likely no longer exist, and it is up to us, her family, to try to fill gaps. Fortunately, she has us. Many other people are not so lucky to have someone to help them. They especially need a PHR.