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How to Create Your Own Personal Health Record

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Hospitals and physicians are putting their cumbersome paper medical records into much more easily accessed and manipulated electronic form. Now you can, too.

An array of products, from computer programs for your desktop to record-keeping software for pocket PCs or Palm devices, allow you to gather, update, and carry your medical information easily in the form of a digital "personal health record." The idea: Having essential health information at your fingertips—your health history and vital stats, any medications you're taking and the dosages, your allergies, your lab results, and even your living will—helps patients communicate more accurately with their doctors and presumably get better care.



(Getty Images)

"An individual may be seeing an allergist, a cardiologist, and a radiologist—sometimes all in the same day," says Eric Pan, an instructor in medicine at Harvard Medical School and a senior scientist at the Center for Information Technology Leadership in Charlestown, Mass. He sees personal health records as a way to make sure all the right information gets to everyone involved in care.

When storing the data at home is what you aim to do, a desktop program or an Internet-based system may be the answer. HealthFrame, for example, is a downloadable product available at recordsforliving.com for about \$40 that lets users keep track of appointments; input medications and such indicators as blood pressure, weight, and cholesterol, which can be graphed and tracked over time; and attach original documents such as doctors' notes and billing receipts. For \$5 a month (or \$8 for two people), the Internet-based [Medikeeper](#) adds several bells and whistles to the standard record-keeping

features. You get access to a "MediLibrary" of in-depth information on diseases and conditions, for example, and a toll-free number that health professionals can call to access your health records in an emergency.

Some Internet-based personal health records support secure E-mail communication so that you can exchange information as needed with your doctor. (Be aware, though, that many doctors are still working out how they'll ask you to pay for E-mail consults.) Kaiser Permanente and Partners Healthcare in Boston are two healthcare providers that have created "tethered" Internet-based systems that are integrated with the companies' own electronic medical records, so participants can get much of their information in one place.

If you desire portability, the \$50 [EMRy Stick](#) plugs into any USB flash drive and lets users create up to 10 different medical profiles—a boon for large families—and print summaries of the data. By plugging the drive into their office computers, doctors can update the information for you at each visit, and print copies for their own records. If the stick is lost—one curse of portability—the data are password protected and automatically encrypted.

As is true with electronic budgeting and bill-paying, it takes some work—and computer savvy—to get started. It's up to the patient to gather the data from his or her team of doctors and upload or input the information into the program. The payoff, says William Kupchunas, a rehabilitation nurse manager at the University of Pennsylvania, is that patients become more knowledgeable about and more accountable for their health and their treatment. Kupchunas recently wrote a paper recommending that health professionals who cooperate with patients wanting to manage their own records use the one-on-one time for some health education.

You'll want to check out the security and privacy policies of the products or services you're comparing, warns Steve Downs, deputy director of Health Group at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. One resource is myphr.com, a service of the American Health Information Management Association. The site also guides you through setting up a personal health record.

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