

## Brief Summary of Recommendations on Email Communication and Established Patient-Doctor Relationships:

- Reserve digital (e-mail) communication only for patients who maintain face-to-face follow up.
- E-communication between patients and physicians with an existing relationship requires discussion and previous agreement before electronic exchange is initiated.
- Guidelines exist for interactions with patients via e-mail, including the appropriate type of information to share and the expectations about turnaround time.
- The nature of e-mail communication ensures a written copy of the exchange, but patient confidentiality must be assured ...
- Documentation of the patient's consent and awareness of the security and risks associated with the use of patient-physician e-mail should be included in the medical record.
- Physicians should not use personal e-mail accounts for these communications but rather encrypted messages over secure network connections.
- Physicians must maintain appropriate boundaries and recognize that electronic communication merely supplements face-to-face encounters.
- Electronic communication with patients, if done in a systematic and thoughtful way, can improve patient care and outcomes.
- It may also improve patient and physician satisfaction by increasing the actual or perceived time spent communicating and having questions answered.
- As other Web tools begin to show promise, this communication is often not limited to standard e-mail. Physicians and patients should be discouraged from communicating on health matters through social media tools that are publicly viewable, do not ensure patient confidentiality, and are not readily recordable or admissible to the medical record.
- Physicians who use e-mail should proceed carefully in responding to patient initiated emails and, preferably, should develop a clear policy regarding responding to such e-mails. An appropriate response might be a brief reply explaining that the physician cannot provide assistance through e-mail unless a proper patient-physician relationship is established through an in-person visit, therefore encouraging the patient to seek medical care through a personal encounter. However, a message that requests an appointment or information of a non-clinical nature, such as fees or hours, is considered administrative in nature and can be answered without ethical concern.
- Source: [AMA CEJA Report 3-I-02: Ethical Guidelines for the Use of Electronic Mail between Patients and Physicians, 1 March 2013.](#)