



Health Information Exchange FAQs

A Health Information Exchange (HIE) establishes connections between health care providers and other entities to allow for secure exchange of electronic medical information. Providers participating in an HIE can use the HIE to access and share electronic, standardized medical information across the HIE to ensure seamless care coordination.

According to the Federal Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC), the principal Federal entity charged with coordination of efforts to implement and use health information technology and the electronic exchange of health information:

“ HIEs allow doctors, nurses, pharmacists, other health care providers and patients to appropriately access and securely share a patient’s vital medical information electronically—improving the speed, quality, safety and cost of patient care.

Despite the widespread availability of secure electronic data transfer, most Americans’ medical information is stored on paper—in filing cabinets at various medical offices, or in boxes and folders in patients’ homes. While electronic health information exchange cannot replace provider–patient communication, it can greatly improve the completeness of patient’s records, (which can have a big effect on care), as past history, current medications and other information is jointly reviewed during visits. ”¹

Who participates in an HIE?

Health care providers, including doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other health care providers and entities may participate in an HIE. There are many regional HIEs, which include providers and other entities from within a given region or state, as well as several national HIEs that seek to span geographic areas. The Federal government is in the process of creating a national, voluntary network of HIEs that will allow for facilitated exchange across multiple entities.²

What are the benefits of participating in an HIE?

- **Seamless, coordinated exchange**—HIEs allow for seamless, secure, electronic exchange of patients’ health information, allowing providers to leverage a single interface to request and access patient health information, as appropriate, rather than having to establish individual connections with multiple providers.
- **Better understanding of patients’ health**—HIEs help providers to build more comprehensive understanding of their patients’ health information, ensuring improved and more informed care. ONC notes that appropriate, timely sharing of vital patient information can better inform decision making at the point of care and allow providers to avoid readmissions, avoid medication efforts, improve diagnoses, and decrease duplicative testing.
- **Improves public health reporting and monitoring**—HIEs may be used to exchange electronic case reporting and to share public health data with other providers and with state and local public health agencies.

Are there Federal incentives for providers to participate in HIEs?

Several Federal health care programs, like Medicare, include incentives through quality programs for providers that exchange electronic health information bidirectionally through HIEs.^{3,4}

How do HIEs protect the privacy and security of patients' health information?

HIEs are responsible for complying with Federal and state health data privacy laws. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) is a Federal law that protects the privacy and security of individually identifiable patient information. Health care providers, health plans, and health care clearinghouses are subject to HIPAA's rules. If these entities engage with a business associate, such as an HIE, to help carry out activities and functions, they must establish clear contracts or other arrangements that comply with HIPAA's requirements to protect the privacy and security of health information.⁵ HHS has also issued additional technical guidance and frequently asked questions regarding HIE's privacy and security responsibilities.^{6,7}

Are HIEs subject to information blocking requirements?

Health care providers, health IT developers, HIEs, and health information networks are all subject to the new information blocking requirements established by the 21st Century Cures Act (P.L. 114-255).^{8,9} This means that HIEs must not engage in a practice that, except as required by law or specified by the Secretary of Health and Human Services as a reasonable and necessary activity, is likely to interfere with access, exchange, or use of electronic health information. The Federal government in 2020 issued regulations to implement these requirements and is expected to issue new proposed regulations to provide further detail and make policy adjustments in fall 2022, which may impact HIEs and other entities subject to the rules.

Can providers report to public health agencies using an HIE?

Some HIEs have built connections with, or are driven by state or local public health agencies, and help facilitate direct, seamless public health reporting by health care providers. Many HIEs helped support state and local COVID-19 responses and are poised to continue as an essential part of these efforts.



Learn how Cognosante strengthens healthcare delivery through data interoperability across local, regional, state, and national HIEs.

¹ HHS Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC): Health Information Exchange

² ONC: Trusted Exchange Framework and Common Agreement

³ CMS, Promoting Interoperability Programs

⁴ CMS, Promoting Interoperability Program – 2022 Medicare Promoting Interoperability Program for Eligible Hospitals and Critical Access Hospitals – Health Information Exchange Objective Fact Sheet

⁵ HHS Office for Civil Rights (OCR): Covered Entities and Business Associates

⁶ OCR: The HIPAA Privacy Rule and Electronic Health Information Exchange in a Networked Environment

⁷ OCR: HIPAA, Health Information Exchanges, and Disclosures of Protected Health Information for Public Health Purposes

⁸ 21st Century Cures Act

⁹ ONC: Information Blocking

About Cognosante

Cognosante is a mission-driven technology company delivering innovative and transformative solutions that improve the health and safety of Americans. With more than a decade of experience working with Federal and state government agencies, we aim to expand access to care, improve care delivery, deliver solutions addressing social determinants of health, and ensure safety and security through multi-faceted technology and customer experience (CX) solutions.