

EMAILING PATIENTS

CHECKLIST FOR PRACTICES

Email is a popular and convenient form of communication and one which many patients like to use. However, practices must ensure that they have appropriate safeguards in place if they communicate with their patients via email.

Practices have a duty under data protection legislation and GMC guidance on confidentiality to keep patient identifiable data secure. The Information Commissioner can impose significant fines on organisations if they fail in their duties as Data Controller, act in a deliberate or reckless way or in a way likely to cause substantial distress or damages to an individual.

Practices should ensure that they:

- have a clear policy/protocol in place.
- have a process for verifying the email address of the patient, ideally taking the address and confirming at a face to face meeting.
- ensure the patient is aware of the risks when communicating via email - making no guarantees of security and that responsibility for any messages once received is the patient's (i.e. if they allow partner/children access to their email, that is their concern not the practice's)
- make sure only appropriate matters are addressed over email (e.g. appointment scheduling, ordering repeat prescriptions, obtaining routine test results).
- include emails to and from the patient in the patient's medical record.
- ensure that there are appropriate levels of encryption when sending and receiving emails. This can be done by putting [secure] in the subject line of an email in NHSMail before sending it and works with any recipient.
- seek advice from their IT provider so that appropriate safeguards are in place and information on the clinical systems remains secure.
- have an automated response to emails to confirm it has been received, when a response can be expected and guidance that the patient should contact the practice directly if the matter is urgent.

- monitor emails enquiries regularly and ensure that they are actioned by the appropriate person promptly.
- communicate in a professional manner; do not use 'text speak'.
- ensure emails are still picked up during absences for leave or sickness.
- allow plenty of time to maintain the system and manage emails.
- never respond to complex, sensitive or difficult issues over email.