

How to Obtain Your Medical Records in the US

You must be the patient, or the parent or guardian of the patient for whom you seek records. Caregivers may be able to access records if the patient has provided written permission to the provider.

Providers are required to keep most adult medical records for six years or more, although this varies by the state where the records are stored. In most states, children's records must be kept for three to 10 years beyond age 18 or 21. If you seek older records, contact the provider to see if they are available. (A provider is another name for doctor, clinic or hospital performing an exam or test.)

Diagnostic lab test records, for such tests as blood tests, CT scans, x-rays, mammograms or others, might need to be requested from the doctor who ordered them, or your primary care physician. In some states, the lab will not provide them to you directly.

If you seek hospital records or records from any other medical facility, such as a hospital, you'll want to request them directly from that facility.

Most doctor offices and facilities ask you to fill out a form to request your records. Call the doctor's office or the medical records department of the hospital where the test/procedure/exam was performed and request a copy of the form. They should be able to deliver it to you by fax, e-mail, or postal mail, or you may pick it up from the office.

If the doctor's office doesn't have a specific form, you may write a letter to make your request. Include the following information:

1. your name, including your maiden name (if applicable)
2. Social Security number
3. date of birth
4. address and phone number
5. e-mail address
6. record(s) being requested
7. date(s) of service (months and years under the doctor's care)
8. signature
9. delivery option (pick up, fax, e-mail, etc.)

Simply drop off or mail the letter to the provider's office.

When a doctor's practice closes or is sold, or upon the death of a provider with no successor in the practice, it may be difficult to determine how to make a request. By law, the acquiring practice or the provider's estate must keep records for 10 years. To track the location of these records, contact your local medical society (try the phone book), a hospital where the provider had admitting privileges, the state medical society or the state department of health. One or more of those organizations should know where the records are being stored and who you'll need to contact to get copies.

Sometimes patients are asked to pay for copies of their medical records. This charge is actually intended to cover the cost of someone's time to retrieve the records, make copies and supply postage, if necessary. Each state has its own laws about how much can be charged, usually an amount per page. In some states, the charge is required only to be "reasonable."

If you can't afford to pay for the records, you cannot be refused access. In most states, you are required to state in your own handwriting that you cannot afford to pay for them. Give that statement to your provider, at which point the provider will usually give them to you at no cost.

One way to bypass the cost in the future may be to request your records as they are developed. Make it a habit to request copies as you get ready to leave the provider's office. Since the records have not yet been stored, you may not be charged anything for the copies. This policy will vary by practice and facility.

Once you have made the request, you may have to wait for awhile before you get the records. State laws regulate how quickly those records must be supplied to a patient. In some states, you'll be given access to review them in the doctor's office immediately but may have to wait from 10 to 60 days to obtain your own copies. Other states require access within 30 days.