

The protection of patient privacy is a high priority, as evidenced by the federal government's strict rules protecting patient medical records and other personal health information.

In reporting on H1N1 flu and other disease outbreaks, the State, counties, local agencies, all public officials, and health care providers must guard against the release of details that could potentially breach patient confidentiality.

The following are examples of patient specific information that should NOT be released:

- Gender. Refer to the patient as the "individual" or "person" rather than as a "man," "woman," "boy," or "girl."
- Age. If it is necessary to differentiate between an adult and a child, provide only a broad age range, e.g., "elementary school age," "young adult," "over 55."
- Hospital where patient is being treated.
- Village, town or city where patient resides. If necessary, indicate only the county of residence.
- Patient's employer or school. If a report is being given by a school district, the report should only indicate that the individual or individuals attend school in the school district. In limited situations, for example, if a student has contracted a communicable disease such as meningitis or measles, and students, teachers and parents need to be alert for symptoms, it may be necessary to identify the school by name.
- Specifics about the patient's medical condition and underlying conditions. If relevant to morbidity or mortality of the case, describe the patient's state of health in broad terms, e.g. "otherwise healthy individual," or someone "with underlying medical conditions," but do NOT provide specific details about the individual's medical condition.
- If the patient is deceased, do NOT provide the date of death. News media frequently search obituaries for identifying information.

The focus of public reporting related to H1N1 flu and other communicable diseases should be on information that increases the public's ability to reduce the risk of transmission and enhances prevention, diagnosis, recovery, and the most appropriate use of health care resources.