

# Direct Secure Messaging Basics: Q&A for Providers

**Got questions about what Direct is and how to use it?**

## What is Direct Secure Messaging?

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Direct Secure Messaging (often called Direct exchange, or Direct for short) utilizes the Direct Standard™, a technical standard for exchanging health information between health care entities (e.g. primary care physicians, specialists, hospitals, clinical labs) in a trusted network. Most entities using Direct utilize the DirectTrust network to support exchange. Direct is secure, easy-to-use, inexpensive, and approved for use by nationally-recognized experts and organizations. Direct utilizes identity-proofing to ensure messages are only accessible to the intended recipient, per the protection regulations of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). In order to participate in the Promoting Interoperability and the Quality Payment Programs under Medicare, providers must use 2015 Edition certified health IT that includes Direct. Some providers may work also with a third party to obtain Direct services. The tools your vendor gives you may or may not include the word “Direct,” so it’s important to have a conversation with your vendor to understand the tools available to you in your EHR product.

## What is a Direct address?

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A Direct address is needed to exchange health information using Direct Secure Messaging. Direct addresses look similar to an e-mail address. Like e-mail addresses, Direct addresses can be issued to individuals or to organizations, departments, or specific devices. An example of a Direct address is b.wells@direct.aclinic.org. While this may look and function similar to an e-mail address, it is important to know that a traditional e-mail account (e.g. gmail, yahoo mail, or your company e-mail) are NOT Direct addresses. Messages sent to or from traditional e-mail accounts do not meet Direct security guidelines and will fail to send via Direct.

Just like distinct fax numbers you may have today for each of your office affiliations, you or your colleagues may have a distinct Direct address for each practice affiliation. Be sure to verify that you are sending to the correct address for the location where you intend to send patient information.



## Where can I get a Direct address?

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Direct addresses are available from a variety of sources, including EHR vendors; state, regional and local Health Information Exchanges; and private service providers offering Direct exchange capabilities called Health Information Service Providers (HISPs).

As mentioned above, to become certified, EHRs are required to certify their Direct offering, manage HISP services themselves or partner with a third party HISP to provide Direct services for their providers.

Because Direct exchange provides a secure means of communication, when obtaining your Direct address, you may be asked to provide information confirming your identity to ensure sensitive patient health information is protected.

For additional resources or support, check with your vendor.

## How do I know the Direct address of providers I refer to/ need to send patient information to?

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Your EHR vendor or HISP may include a provider directory with Direct addresses for providers or facilities you need to send patient information to. If not, take the same approach that you take today to get their fax number – call and ask them for it!

## What if the providers I need to communicate with don't have Direct addresses?

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They likely do have a Direct address – they just call it by a different name in their system, or they may not know what it is. If they are unaware of their address, encourage them to reach out to their vendor to discover their address so you can communicate with them quickly and securely.

## Can Direct help meet incentive program (Promoting Interoperability//MIPS/QPP/etc.) Measures?

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Yes. Several incentive payment program requirements include requirements to transmit C-CDA type documents with other providers. Direct easily supports the exchange of this document type and many others (images, text). Using Direct to exchange a C-CDA may help you meet incentive payment measures. It's best to talk with your vendor about how to meet the measure in your specific system.





## **Will I get spammed if I share my Direct address with others?**

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No. Unlike traditional e-mail, Direct has special security mechanisms that prevent you from receiving messages from people you don't trust. This means that spam is very unlikely!

## **Once I have a Direct address, will I be able to exchange with any other provider with a Direct address?**

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Because Direct uses strong security to protect your communications (just like your trusted internet interactions with financial institutions, online retailers, and other secured websites), certain steps may need to be taken to start exchanging information with another provider to ensure that they are a trusted connection. While much of the technical details of this will be handled by your EHR vendor, there are a few important points to note on establishing trust with other providers:

- Based on your system or the other provider's system, you may be required to indicate your wish to send and/or receive information from the other provider.
- Depending on the EHR and/or HISP you and the receiving provider are using, you need assistance from your vendor to establish this trusted relationship

