

# 10 Ways to Lose Your Medical Records

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*By Jordan Robertson*

## *Info on the Loose*

Medical information is a gold mine for thieves. They can steal your identity, pull insurance scams or even blackmail you with that information. Unfortunately, there are more ways today for your health records to fall into the wrong hands than ever before. Here are 10 scenarios where medical records could be stolen -- some you might have expected, while others could be surprising.

## *Laptops Left in the Car*

One of the least secure places for your medical data is on a medical staffer's laptop, especially if it's left in a car. This is one of the most common ways medical data are stolen.

## *Computer Viruses*

Hackers are mainly interested in stealing banking passwords and similar data, but when they infect medical-office computers going after that information, health files often fall into their hands. This is another common way health data are compromised.

## *A Surprising Lesson*

A teacher at Naugatuck Valley Community College in Connecticut was discovered to be using patient X-rays from Saint Mary's Hospital to teach a class on radiology technology. The X-rays contained patient names and physician notes. The hospital apologized.

## *Office Employees*

The staffs at hospitals and the doctor's office aren't always looking out for your best interests. Employees have been caught using patient information to file bogus medical claims and tax returns, create "ghost" employees, sell to gang members and pry into the lives of celebrities.

## *Take That E-mail Back*

Well-intentioned medical workers have also been known to lose patients' electronic files by sending them in e-mails to the wrong people.

## *Available on the Web*

Medical providers have inadvertently posted private health data to their public websites. A recent example was Phoenix Cardiac Surgery in Arizona, which was accused of posting surgical appointments on a publicly accessible Internet calendar. The company paid \$100,000 in a settlement with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and agreed to change its policies concerning patient data.

In another incident, a contractor for Stanford Hospital sent a spreadsheet containing information on 20,000 emergency room patients to a job candidate as part of a skills test. The job seeker then posted the data on a website, asking for help with the test, according to the *New York Times*. The hospital severed its relationship with the contractor.

## *Dumpster Diving*

Much of the health-care industry still uses paper to record sensitive information about patients. Another common way breaches occur is for those documents to be thrown in the trash without shredding. Patient documents, including X-rays, have been found blowing across fields and overflowing from garbage and recycling bins.

## *Cleaning Crews*

Janitorial workers have mistakenly thrown away computers that contained sensitive information. One example occurred last year in Pennsylvania when a cleaning crew for Lebanon Internal Medicine Associates improperly disposed of a computer server that had more than a decade's worth of patient information. The company said the files were likely inaccessible because of damage to the machine from being submerged in floodwater.

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