



6 Tips On Dealing With Paper Records After Digitizing

This is an extra resource to go along with the original article:
[What to know before converting paper medical records to EMR](#)

What should you do with your paper records after you're done digitizing? Here's what to know.

1. You can destroy paper files if they're identical to your EMRs

If your paper files and EMRs are identical, you can toss your paper files. State laws determine how long you must keep a patient's medical record, but as long as the file is fully digitized (all information is in the system), it's a valid file, meaning that you can destroy the paper file if you want to save space.

2. You can keep paper files for as long as you need

You can also keep them if you're not concerned about space, or you want them just in case something happens to your system. You can also store paper files offsite if necessary, just be sure you use a trusted vendor to ensure patient privacy.

3. If files are in a "coded format" you may want to keep paper files just in case
However, if the paper record is being reentered into the EHR in the required "coded format," it might not be considered the same record legally. Given that the broadening EHR world is in its infancy, retention of paper records for a sufficient period of time is likely the wisest course of action in either scenario.

4. You will want to double-check your Liability Insurance Requirements

Before you decide to toss your paper records, review your malpractice insurance and seek guidance as to the expectations of your insurer with regard to record retention. Some carriers have actually issued direct policy-requirement statements covering record retention in the context of EMR conversion. Your carrier may have a requirement or other guidance that would be useful in formulating or revising your record retention policy.

5. Paper records may need to be kept for certain patients

Your paper records may need to be kept longer in cases involving minors, an individual with a "disability", or in death cases where statutes of limitation may be extended to allow time to appoint a representative of the estate. In the instance of a malpractice lawsuit, an original paper record may be needed to defend a plaintiff's claim that certain entries were "inked" into the record after the fact in order to establish a defense and the original is needed for a forensics expert to determine how long the ink has been dry.



6. Make sure files are destroyed properly

If you decide you no longer need your paper medical records, they can be shredded or burned. You may want to create a permanent record destruction log, individually listing all medical records with the following information:

- Patient name and medical record number (or other identifier)
- Date of destruction, combined with a notation that the record was destroyed in accordance with the retention policy; and
- Signature of staff person performing the destruction, or if you are using a record destruction company, the name of the company and signature(s) of individuals witnessing the destruction. (Add signatures after the destruction has been completed.)

If you use a third party to destroy your paper medical records, make sure the destruction contract specifies the method of destruction and time to elapse between acquisition and destruction, and that there are additional safeguards in place for patient confidentiality.