

A message from the AMA about physician data distribution and privacy

For a century, the American Medical Association has been recognized as a trusted source of information on all physicians in the United States. The AMA began collecting information on physicians as early as 1906 for the purposes of membership recruitment and retention activities as well as credentials verification. The AMA began licensing an extract of its unique database known as the Physician Masterfile to external users more than 60 years ago.

What kind of physician data does the AMA collect in its Physician Masterfile and from where?

The AMA collects Physician Masterfile data on all physicians in the United States who have completed or are completing requirements to practice medicine in the United States, including U.S.-trained physicians temporarily located overseas. Through the voluntary cooperation of a variety of sources such as health-related agencies, institutions and organizations, the Physician Masterfile includes data on both members and nonmembers of the AMA and international medical graduates (IMGs) who reside or practice in the United States. Each physician record consists of historical and current practice data sections.

The historical section contains demographic, educational and permanent professional information. Data in this section are obtained only from primary sources, including medical schools, hospitals, medical societies, the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG), state licensing agencies, medical groups, federal agencies including the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and others. Physicians' current practice information (phone and fax numbers, for example) are obtained directly from physicians themselves through the AMA Census of Physicians survey or other data sources. E-mail addresses are not licensed or sold and are used only for internal use by the AMA and its subsidiaries.

Does the AMA Physician Masterfile include prescribing data?

The AMA has never compiled, sold or had access to physician prescribing data. Health care information organizations (HIOs) obtain prescribing data from pharmacies, claims processors and pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs) and append these data to a variety of physician databases including the AMA Physician Masterfile.

Why does the AMA maintain the Physician Masterfile?

Physician data in the AMA Physician Masterfile serve a variety of important public health and safety purposes. These range from helping to identify employment trends in the medical profession to protecting patients by helping health care organizations verify physicians' credentials in accordance with standards set by accrediting organizations. The government has used Physician Masterfile data in times of national emergencies like Sept. 11 and Hurricane Katrina.

In today's digital world, the Physician Masterfile is also used to confirm physician identity in a variety of online medical transactions.

Who licenses AMA Physician Masterfile data?

AMA Physician Masterfile data are made available to AMA Database Licensees under contractual agreements that protect the viability of the data and physician privacy. The Database Licensees, which use the Physician Masterfile, work primarily with a variety of health care-related companies that offer a wide range of products for physicians and the larger medical community.

Some of these products include:

- Medical and professional journals
- Continuing medical education (CME) programs
- Physician credential verification services
- Drug samples and pharmaceutical information
- Medical equipment and supplies
- Employment opportunities for health professionals
- General practice-related commercial offers germane to the practice of medicine

What efforts has the AMA made toward ensuring data security?

The AMA is constantly reviewing its security infrastructure. This includes periodic reviews by external security experts. The AMA's policies and procedures are revised or enhanced to minimize security threats and to ensure that the AMA security protections meet applicable security standards.

The AMA's system prevents individual physicians and third-party organizations from altering information in the Physician Masterfile. In addition, all educational and licensure information changes require verification from a primary source before they are approved for inclusion in the Physician Masterfile.

Does the AMA have a formal physician privacy policy for the Physician Masterfile?

Yes. Physicians who choose not to receive information on the products and/or services offered through AMA Database Licensees may specify this preference as part of the AMA Do Not Release policy. If a physician requests this status, the AMA will prohibit the release of that physician's information to all entities and their direct affiliates outside the AMA, except in the event of national emergencies.

Specifically:

The Do Not Release policy prohibits the AMA from releasing any Physician Masterfile information on the physician. If a physician instructs the AMA to flag his/her record as Do Not Release, AMA Database Licensees will no longer have the right to use Physician Masterfile information for the purpose of contacting the physician, which would include health hazard warnings and drug recalls. The Do Not Release flag will also prohibit release of Physician Masterfile information to state licensing boards and hospitals that use this information to verify credentials, unless the AMA has written permission from the physician to release his/her Physician Masterfile information to a specific organization.

As part of its efforts to protect the privacy of physician data, the AMA also offers a less stringent No Contact option.

The No Contact status on a Physician Masterfile record ensures that the physician's name will not be licensed for purposes of marketing to the physician via mail, telephone or fax. The physician will still receive health hazard warnings, drug recalls and AMA-related information. Information will be released to state licensing boards or hospitals to verify credentials. However, if the No Contact designation is selected, AMA Database Licensees will not be permitted to use Physician Masterfile information for promotional mailings, fax transmissions or telephone calls. The physician may not receive professional journals from publishers, offers to participate in research studies or CME announcements from firms that license AMA Physician Masterfile data.

Physicians may choose one of the following methods to notify the AMA:

E-mail	nocontact@ama-assn.org norelease@ama-assn.org
Call	(800) 621-8335
Fax*	(312) 464-4042
Mail*	Department of Data Quality and Measurement American Medical Association 330 N. Wabash Ave., Suite 39300 Chicago, IL, 60611
AMA Web site	ama-assn.org/no-contact-request ama-assn.org/do-not-release-form AMA Online Data Collection Center: ama-assn.org/online-data-collection-center

*The physician's signature is required on his/her professional letterhead.

Note: Due to the advance purchase of AMA Physician Masterfile information for mailing purposes, it may take 90 days or more for all end-users to implement a Do Not Release or No Contact request. The AMA, however, will process the physician's request immediately upon receipt. Also, if at a later date the physician wishes to reinstate a "release" or "contact" he/she may do so by contacting the AMA using one of the methods described above.

Can the AMA help physicians restrict the use of their prescribing data?

Yes. Due to licensing agreements with its Database Licensees, which include HIOs that compile prescribing data, the AMA was able to develop a program that empowers physicians by allowing them to elect to restrict access to their prescribing data from pharmaceutical sales representatives. To learn more about the Physician Data Restriction Program, to register observations about the use of prescribing data or to opt out of having prescribing data released to pharmaceutical sales representatives, physicians should visit ama-assn.org/ensuring-physician-database-privacy.