DETERMINING IF A WEB SITE IS SECURE

This newsletter is one in a series that provides general information on key components of the HIPAA Privacy and Security Regulations. More detailed information and policies are available on the MCW HIPAA website. In this newsletter we’ll cover how to determine if a web site is secure.

Normally a web site does not have security activated because most web pages only display publicly accessible information. However, when sensitive information is passed, Secure Socket Layer (SSL) security is turned on. Internet browsers have a feature that allows you to determine if security is active. Encryption is a security technique used to protect information by making it unreadable during transmission. Secure web sites use SSL technology, which is the current industry standard for encryption. SSL works with secure browsers, like Netscape (version 2.0 or greater) and Internet Explorer (version 2.1 or greater). By using SSL, information is scrambled before it leaves your browser and is unscrambled when it reaches the web site. Should someone intercept the transmission it will be unreadable and will be extremely difficult for them to translate into a readable message.

You can tell if the web site is secure by looking at the lower right hand corner of your screen if you are using Internet Explorer. If the web site is secure, you will see a lock icon.

To view more information about the security, double click on the lock and a window will open that will display more information about the security for the web site. Make sure that the web address that is shown here matches the site that you are visiting.

If you use Internet Explorer 7 you will get another layer of protection with sites that use Extended Validation (EV) SSL Certificates. The address bar should turn green to alert you that there is more information available about the web site. The identity of the web site owner is also displayed on the address bar.

Finally, when you get to the web site’s screen where you enter financial or other personal information, make sure that the web address begins with https.

COMPUTER SECURITY TIP:
Get into the habit of locking up your laptop when you’re not using it. Additionally, both laptops and Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) should be password protected in case they are lost or stolen.

YOU CAN REFERENCE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON HIPAA PRIVACY AND SECURITY AT:
The MCW HIPAA website: http://infoscope.mcw.edu/display/router.asp?docid=7961