

**OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT  
VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION**

FAQ Topic: Email correspondence with VA research subjects and potential subjects

Date: February 8, 2013

Question: Can VA researchers use VA research subjects' or potential subjects' personal email accounts (e.g., Gmail or Hotmail) to correspond with subjects or to recruit potential subjects?

Answer: The answer in most cases is NO. VA researchers cannot use VA research subjects' or potential subjects' personal email accounts for correspondence of any kind unless VHA privacy and information security requirements are met. VA staff have a responsibility to ensure communications with subjects are secure and protected. Communication of sensitive information\* from or to VA staff by non-encrypted email is not permitted (see [VA Handbook 6500: Risk Management Framework for VA Information Systems – Tier 3: VA Information Security Program](#)). In general, encrypted emails sent from VA email accounts cannot be accessed from personal email accounts such as Gmail and Hotmail. Furthermore, even if VA staff do not include sensitive information in their emails, there is no way to reliably prevent the VA research subject or potential subject from sending a reply that includes sensitive information. In addition, personal email accounts may be more susceptible to hacking than VA email accounts.

My HealtheVet is currently the only VA approved method for VA staff to communicate by email with Veterans. My HealtheVet accounts may be used to communicate with VA research subjects and prospective subjects.

\*Sensitive information is defined in [VHA Handbook 1605.1: Privacy and Information Security](#) as “. . . health information that, with a reasonable degree of medical certainty, is likely to have a serious adverse effect on an individual's mental or physical health if revealed to the individual.”

References: [VA Handbook 6500: Risk Management Framework for VA Information Systems – Tier 3: VA Information Security Program](#)

[VHA Handbook 1605.1: Privacy and Information Security](#)

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FAQ – Emails to Research Subjects