Ottawa Health Science Network Research Ethics Board (OHSN-REB) /
Conseil d'éthique de la recherche du réseau de science de la santé d'Ottawa (CÉR-RSSO

Guidance for Obtaining Participant Consent Using the "Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email" Form

This guidance document applies when the study population is **patients** at The Ottawa Hospital (TOH) and University of Ottawa Heart Institute (UOHI). If the study population is non-patients, this document does not apply. If the study population is patients from another institution, the other institution's policies surrounding use of email in research must be followed.

General

The use of email can be an effective method of communication between the research team and potential/existing participants; however, institutional policies need to be followed to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of existing /potential participants is protected.

As per TOH and UOHI privacy policy, email is a non-secure method of communication and therefore patient consent to communicate by email must be obtained prior to email contact.

When does the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* Form apply?

The *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form may be used in the following scenarios:

- ✓ If a patient **has not** agreed to be contacted by email (i.e.: "Email" is **not** selected as a communication preference in EPIC or as a preferred method of contact under *"Other Communications"* in their MyChart).

and/or

- ✓ The REB has indicated that express verbal or written consent is required due to the nature of the research or patient population.

Note, alternatively, potential/existing participant consent to communicate by email may be documented in a note in EPIC (i.e.: consent does not have to be documented on the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form but can instead be documented in an EPIC note).

Obtaining and Documenting Consent via the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* Form

1. A discussion about use of email must occur with the potential/existing participant. The discussion may occur in person, over the phone or via an institutionally approved virtual platform.

2. In addition to going through all bullets on the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form, the discussion should also include the following:

- How email will be used during the research study. For example, emailing recruitment poster/brochure, consent forms, scheduling study visits, sharing of online / electronic surveys/questionnaires, etc.
- The type of sensitive or personal information they wish to receive (or not receive) by email.

- They do not need to share an email address to take part in the research study and other forms of communication/secure document transfer may be used (e.g.: MyChart, secure link, etc.).
    - Note, if the study activities cannot be carried out without use of email, use of email will need to be part of the study eligibility criteria in the REB application.

- If they decide at any time throughout the duration of the study that they no longer want to communicate by email, they may withdraw their email contact information.
    - Note, this must be documented immediately in the study record and/or EPIC.

3. After a discussion about the use of email has occurred, verbal or written consent from the potential/existing participant must be obtained and documented. Note, the type of consent (verbal or written) required may vary depending on the nature of the study (e.g.: written consent may be required if sending highly sensitive PHI (Personal Health Information) via email).

   If the discussion takes place **in person**:

   - **Written consent** should be obtained. Provide the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form to the potential/existing participant and obtain their inked signature, in person.

       - If there is a potential risk related to COVID, **verbal consent** may instead be obtained and documented on the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form itself, in EPIC and/or in the study record by the research team.

   If the discussion takes place **over the phone** or via an **institutionally approved virtual platform**:

   - **Written consent** may be obtained and documented on the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form. Written consent should be sought if the study population is vulnerable and/or the nature of the study is sensitive (e.g.: mental health studies, rare diseases).
       - Mail the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form to the potential/existing participant along with a pre-paid and addressed envelope. The potential/existing participant must sign the form in ink and return it via mail or in-person at an upcoming appointment onsite.
       - Send the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form to the potential/existing participant via the institutionally approved virtual platform chat (e.g.: MS Teams Meeting Chat). The potential/existing participant must print, sign the form in ink and return it via the institutionally approved virtual platform chat or in-person at an upcoming appointment onsite.

   - **Verbal consent** may be obtained and documented on the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form itself, in EPIC and/or in the study record by the research team.

     After verbal consent has been documented, a copy of the *"Research Participant Consent to*

Communicate by Email" form should be provided to the potential/existing participant - via mail, email, in person at an upcoming appointment - however they prefer.

Does the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form need to be submitted to REB for approval?

Note: the *"Research Participant Consent to Communicate by Email"* form **does not** need to be submitted to the REB for approval. This is a standard document that has been approved by TOH and UOHI Privacy Offices and OHSN-REB and should not be altered.

References

TOH Corporate Policy ADM II 260b: Patient Privacy

TOH Corporate Policy C-SOP II 350: Secure Transfer of Sensitive Information

For Heart Institute policy and procedures, please refer to the Heart Hub.