



# Online Medical Information—O My, Seeing Things About Me Before My Doctor Does!

By Dwaine Rieves, MD

**First the grand news:** Almost all medical facilities in the DC area offer patients the ability to securely log into an internet website and see their personal medical information. These websites are called “Online Patient Portals.”

**Next the challenging news:** Sometimes you can see information on these portals even before your doctor does, which means it may be hard to figure out the meaning of the information.

Over the years, I’ve seen several doctors for my health problems, and I have been cared for in several medical facilities here in the DC area. It’s been a bit of a challenge to coordinate the sharing of information among these folks as well as keep track of it for myself. So, I was delighted when the “Online Patient Portal” option became available a couple of years ago.

I could log into my personal medical record and see my lab reports, my doctor reports, my X-ray reports (on and on), so I could better understand my medical situation. I could even print out the information and take it into the doctor’s office with me when it came time for my next visit. By bringing in a copy of the information, the doctor could see my test results right away and help me understand my medical matters. I found this important because my doctor would sometimes order tests that are done in facilities that do not automatically share reports with him/her.

For instance, my main primary care doctor belongs to a group called “Privia.” Sometimes, my Privia doctor sends me to a Medstar Health Facility Doctor or to a Medstar testing site (laboratory or radiology). Each of these facilities has an Online Patient Portal and they don’t automatically crosstalk with each other. You can check them out at these links:

- <https://www.myprivia.com/account-access>
- <https://www.medstarhealth.org/mymedstar-patient-portal>

After signing in, the portals allow me to see my medical reports quickly. Plus (and this is the grand part) the portals generally allow me to email any questions or concerns back to my doctor or to a healthcare provider who monitors the portal system.

Of course, there are pros and cons to the Online Patient Portal system. Some people may not want to see information before their doctor does. The information may be complicated and/or alarming, creating more anxiety than it should. For this reason, patients are not required or necessarily even expected to log onto their portals—instead, the system is fully optional. To help understand the system I offer up a few insights below (including a bit of my opinion, which probably should be regarded in the way my husband often regards it—a nod and that’s that).

### Why Do We Have the Portal?

Since 2022, Federal laws have encouraged and financially incentivized medical facilities to develop the portals. These laws try to improve people’s health and healthcare by improving communication.

Facilities are supposed to post information that is important to a patient’s health EXCEPT for the following: psychiatric information, any information that a doctor/facility regards as potentially harmful to a patient, and information that pertains to legal deliberations.

### Should I Look at the Portal?

Examining the portal and using it is entirely optional. The portal is a service intended to help patients; it is not intended to add burdens to patients.

### What Do I Do with the Information on the Portal?

Sometimes, the information on the portal is easily interpreted (such as “no sign of a broken bone” on an X-ray). Often though, the information is not so easy to interpret—because what you are seeing is typically information that is directed to the doctor or healthcare provider, as has long been the medical practice. So, the reports are commonly in medical lingo, which may be difficult to understand.

Also, the reports can include information about the technical details of a test. All these details underscore how it is important to discuss any alarming observations with your doctor/healthcare provider—i.e., some highlighted information on the report may pertain to the test and not the patient.

The portal benefits may include your ability to request prescription renewals, provide email notes to your doctor, and help you and your doctor keep track of your overall health.

### What Does the Information Mean for Me?

The meaning of the information on the portal is often obvious (as when you receive a personal email note from your doctor), but in the situation where you see a perplexing report—the matter is best discussed with your doctor. For example, you could send an email via the portal, inquiring about a result. Again, it is important to remember that laboratory reports often contain way more technical information than is essential for a patient to understand. Sometimes, the test report numbers say more about the test itself than the patient who underwent the test.

### How Do I Get Help Understanding the Information?

One of the neat things about the portals is that they almost always have a communication route (email or phone number to call) to your doctor or healthcare provider. The upshot is to remember that interpreting all the information on the portal is “context-dependent” matter, meaning that the importance of the information to a patient often depends as much on a patient’s unique features as it does on the information from a test. In short, you matter more than the test. And as for me, I find the portal information a good help in understanding and calming the “me” who quietly fears becoming just another impatient patient.

**Stay tuned for upcoming news on this topic!**