

Is it good or bad for Google to store medical data in the cloud?

Many people are worried about security and privacy issues, when Google holds the data of about 50 million patients. So, what are the pros and cons of storing medical data in the cloud?

In November 2019, Google announced it would partner with the Ascension health system. The two sides will manage patient data together in the cloud. The company assures patients that they will comply with industry regulations on patient data such as HIPPA. However, many people cannot help worrying about security and privacy issues, as Google holds the data of about 50 million patients.

So, what are the pros and cons of storing medical data in the cloud?

What if medical data were stored in the cloud?

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Advantages of cloud-based medical data storage



Certainly there are some advantages of storing patient data online, such as being easily accessible. This can even help health care providers give their patients a better service.

File sharing between health care providers

A common problem in health care is what happens to someone's profile, when they move to a new city or area. When they see a doctor in their new home, it may be difficult for the doctor to access the patient's previous medical data. The reason is because different localities and organizations have different ways of organizing and storing files.

Without access to a patient's previous medical data, a new doctor may not be able to fully grasp a patient's medical history. The doctor may also not be aware of the current condition or the medications the patient is taking. This can cause problems if, for example, your new doctor is unaware of the allergy you are forced to take on a specific medication.

A similar problem occurs with the sharing of data between health professionals. You may need to visit your general practitioner and cardiologist regularly. Ideally, you would want these two doctors to talk to each other. If one of them discovered a problem, the other doctor would quickly find out. However, sharing information between health care providers can be a bit difficult.

Different hospitals or clinics may not be able to exchange good information. This may result in information not being transmitted to all relevant health care providers.

This lack of ability to share data raises issues. For example, if different health care providers are performing duplicate tests, it is both a waste of money and a cause for stress for patients. With the cloud-based system, healthcare providers share records with each other much easier.

Especially in the case of Google's system, it intends to merge the records into a readable format. That will help doctors and nurses easily find the data they need.

Back up files in an emergency

Just like backing up files on a computer, files that contain medical information are vulnerable if not backed up. Suppose records are kept on paper, fire or flood are likely to destroy them completely.

The same problem arises if a hospital system stores electronic files but does not back them up. In this case, a problem with the hospital software or server could destroy medical records.

Storing files in the cloud makes them less vulnerable to disasters. Cloud storage is not a replacement for a real backup, but it is definitely safer against disasters.

Access files from any location

If you live in a big city, you may have no problem finding a doctor or hospital near you. However, if you live in a rural area, this can be much harder. Some people live for hours on the move from the nearest health care provider.

For these people, as well as the elderly or people with mobility problems, eHealth is a growing field. This area refers to the use of telecommunications for health care. For example, you can have an appointment with a virtual

doctor using video chat technology like Skype. There is also mHealth, which uses mobile phones for health care.

In these cases, it is very important to be able to access medical files from a location away from the patient's home. Cloud storage of medical files means it doesn't matter how far you are from the medical provider. Doctors can still see your medical records when needed.

Disadvantages of cloud-based medical data storage



The storage of cloud-based medical files is not an advantage. There are still limitations to consider.

Potential security risks

Whenever information is stored digitally, it is vulnerable to security risks. Hackers can access medical files, which contain a lot of highly private information.

When organizations store files centrally, the service provider may not be able to control the security measures for all that data. If the project between Google and Ascension is attacked, a large amount of personal data could fall into the wrong hands.

Privacy issues

Another major concern is whether a company like Google can be trusted to hold such highly sensitive data. Previously, this company had admitted that third-party applications can read your Gmail.

And there have been cases where companies like Amazon have employees listening to what people consider to be a private recording.

A lot of people worry that the same thing could happen to medical data. The fact that a Google employee can see your medical records is annoying. People trust doctors, not technology companies, in keeping their health information.

Add to the fact that many patients are unaware that their data may be transferred to Google. Legally, Ascension is not required to notify Google of a plan to its patients. But many were shocked to learn that their medical files could be accessed by a company like Google.

Make money from health care data



Finally, there is another issue raised by digitization in the healthcare sector as a whole. Think of a device like Fitbit. It is a great way to encourage people to exercise more to become healthier.

Some health insurance companies offer discounts to customers who use physical tracking tools like Fitbit. And the employer in your workplace may soon force you to use such health monitoring bracelets, if you wish to qualify for health-related benefits. Or even an insurance company may refuse to pay claims, if the customer is not active enough according to the data on the health monitoring bracelet.

These risks are exacerbated when storing health care data in the cloud. This makes it possible for insurance companies or employers to access client / employee health data.

There are several positive aspects of moving medical data to the cloud, including better communication between doctors and enabling services like eHealth to work. However, there are also security and privacy restrictions for this method.

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