**Guidance on obtaining consent from research participants online**

**(for online and in-person study designs)**

**Anonymous Online Research**

For anonymous online research, consent can be assumed through completion of an online survey/questionnaire without the need for a consent form – but that should be confirmed in the Information Sheet.

**Online Research using personal data**

For online studies where personal data (but not special category personal data) is collected, including studies where the only identifier used is an IP address, consent, and all other data required can be collected through a survey tool such as REDCap. The participant can read the information sheet and then tick their agreement to each of the consent form sections, and then, providing they agree to all the consent required, continue with the study. Guidance on using survey tools from UCL Information Services Division is available here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/isd/it-for-slms/research-ig/guides/get-data-survey-tool>

It is best practice for participants to be given a copy of what they have consented to[[1]](#footnote-1). Participants can be offered options to download the information sheet and consent questions or to enter an email address to which a copy of this information will be sent.

If the research relies on **special category personal data**[[2]](#footnote-2) then extra efforts need to be made to secure the identifiers relating to participants in the study. In this case consent as well as identifiable information (e.g. name, email address) can be collected through a survey tool such as REDCap in the UCL Data Safe Haven. The participant can read the information sheet and then tick their agreement to each of the consent form sections, enter their name, email address, and any other personal details required, and submit the form. REDCap can then allocate them an ID number, as long as all necessary consent items have been agreed to. The remainder of the research can be conducted within this REDCap questionnaire if that is appropriate. If REDCap in the UCL Data Safe Haven does not have all of the required survey features available, then it should still be possible to conduct the initial questionnaire (to collect personal information and consent) in REDCap and the follow on survey on a separate platform, in accordance with the UCL Information Services Division guidance above. In such studies, the next stage will require the participant’s ID number to be collected, either from an embedded link issued during the first stage, or by them typing it in to a text field, once they arrive at the follow on survey address.

For all online research using a survey tool outside of the UCL Data Safe Haven, the resulting data should be downloaded as soon as is practical to some form of encrypted storage. Desktop @ UCL computers employ BitLocker for Windows by default but some users will be unsure whether they are using this type of desktop or not. To check whether BitLocker encryption is working on your computer, follow the guidance here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/isd/services/computers/staff/desktopucl-managed-computers/hard-drive-encryption-using-bitlocker> . All staff/students have access to standard Desktop @ UCL machines within the computer labs and libraries, on campus. If your device is anything other than a standard Desktop @ UCL computer then be aware that adequate encryption tools are generally free and you should always encrypt any device used for personal data. Follow UCL Information Security Group’s guidance on encryption here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/information-security/technical-advice/encryption>.

**Research conducted in person**

Where researchers and participants meet in person to carry out research, historically, consent has been recorded on a paper consent form. Where consent is not taken at the UCL premises where these forms are stored, there are data security risks associated with researchers transporting and storing them. An alternative is to use a survey tool to obtain informed consent. If the study relies on special category personal data, then it is recommended to use a REDCap survey hosted on the UCL Data Safe Haven. The participant can read the information sheet and then tick their agreement to each of the consent form sections, enter their name, email address, and any other personal details required, and submit the form. REDCap can then allocate them an ID number, as long as all necessary consent items have been agreed to. A participant can complete this on a tablet, phone or computer. The ID number created can then be used on all other assessments (e.g. recorded interviews, paper questionnaires, and height and weight measurements).

If the study does not rely on special category personal data, then researchers are not required to use the Data Safe Haven instance of REDCap to collect online consent. Alternatives are referenced in the above Information Services Division guidance on survey tools.

As stated above it is best practice for participants to be given a copy of what they have consented to. If participants provide consent on their own device they can be offered the option to download the information sheet and consent questions. If using the researchers’ device they can opt to enter an email address to which a copy of this information will be sent. Alternatively they could complete both an electronic (for the researcher) and paper version (for the participant) of the consent forms. Paper copies would need to be brought to the appointment by the researcher for anyone who doesn’t have an email address or can’t remember it.

If it is not possible to collect online consent, other procedures will need to be put in place to try to minimise the data security risk of carrying paper consent forms.

**Proof of Consent**

Once consent is captured in this way it can be retained electronically in accordance with the UCL Records Management Policy[[3]](#footnote-3).

1. https://www.hra.nhs.uk/planning-and-improving-research/best-practice/informing-participants-and-seeking-consent/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/ucl-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/guidance-notices-ucl-staff/handling-personal-data [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/about-us/records-office/university-college-london-records-management-policy [↑](#footnote-ref-3)