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## Talking with your doctor about sensitive issues

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### Summary

- It's important to share information with your doctor, even if you feel uncomfortable talking about it.
  - Doctors are not allowed to share information about your health with anyone else, unless you agree. There are some exceptions to this, such as when doctors must report cases of particular diseases or child abuse.
  - Doctors are used to dealing with personal and sensitive issues and will help make you feel comfortable.
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Talking to your doctor about some health topics can be hard if they're not a topic you would talk about with others. Things like sex, abuse, drug or alcohol use, memory problems, grief or depression may feel embarrassing to discuss, but doctors deal with these issues every day. They are trained to deal with sensitive issues and to be aware of the different needs and cultural backgrounds of the people in their care. Talking with your doctor about your sensitive issue will help you get the care you need.

Open and honest doctor-patient communication is an important step in building trust. A good doctor or healthcare professional will help you to feel comfortable. They will listen, give you options based on facts, and have your best interests in mind. They will encourage you to ask questions. Your doctor will probably have heard your sensitive issue or questions before and will not find it awkward or embarrassing.

### Privacy and confidentiality

Doctors are obliged to accept your questions and medical issues without judgement. This means that no matter what your question or issue is, your doctor should treat you fairly and kindly, without embarrassment.

Anything you talk about with your doctor or healthcare professional is private and confidential. Except in rare situations, your doctor is not allowed to talk about you and your health with anyone you know, including close family members. Your doctor or healthcare professional cannot share anything you say without your consent. There are strict rules preventing doctors from revealing your medical condition or details of a consultation.

The exception to medical confidentiality is if someone is at risk of being harmed. Even then, this rule is for your protection and safety. Doctors can also share information if they believe a person lacks capacity to care for themselves or to understand medical issues, which can make it easier for family or carers to access information.

If you are confused about what your doctor can and cannot reveal to others, you can ask at the beginning of your consultation. All doctors are aware of the laws for confidentiality and many have policies for their clinics.

### Find the right doctor

You can make an appointment to see a different doctor if you feel uncomfortable talking about a sensitive issue with your regular doctor. Ask for a recommendation from family or friends. If you have a preference, you can also ask to see a male or female doctor.

If English is not your first language, you can look for a doctor who speaks the same language as you, or you can ask for an interpreter to be at your consultation. This will help you express yourself freely and reduce any potential language or cultural confusion.

Once you have found a doctor you feel you can talk with openly, remember to take your health history, either listing what you know or getting a copy from your previous doctor. It also helps to make a list of any medication or health supplements you take and the dosages, as well as any other treatment you receive.

### Trusting your doctor and healthcare team

One of the best ways to reduce feelings of embarrassment or discomfort when talking about sensitive issues is to

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build a strong, trusting relationship with your doctor or healthcare team, and the best way to do that is by talking openly and honestly.

Tell your doctor about any beliefs or feeling you have that may affect your health and treatment. Your doctor understands that it is important to build trust to help you both understand your health and give you the best medical outcome.

### **Tips for talking about sensitive issues**

Tips for talking to your doctor about sensitive issues include:

- If you feel uncomfortable talking face to face with a doctor or healthcare professional, call a telephone helpline, such as **Nurse-On-Call**, for free advice.
- Rehearsing what you want to say or ask can help make you feel less nervous or embarrassed.
- Tell the healthcare professional that you want to talk about a sensitive issue. This helps the healthcare professional ensure that the environment is private and your concerns will be managed sensitively.
- If you feel too uncomfortable talking to your regular doctor or healthcare professional about a sensitive health issue, considering making an appointment at another clinic.
- If you have a preference, ask the receptionist to see a male or female doctor or healthcare professional.
- If it helps, ask someone to come with you for support or to speak on your behalf.

### **Where to get help**

- Your GP (doctor)
- Your team of healthcare professionals
- **Nurse-On-Call**

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