



ZocDoc

Healthcare's Open Secret: Patients' White Lies (And How Doctors Can Help)

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As every doctor learns in medical school, patients are human. We all tend to exaggerate the good and downplay the bad. Giving straight answers about diet and exercise can be a challenge, and asking real health questions leaves patients feeling vulnerable or embarrassed.

But “white lies” have real repercussions for patient health outcomes. Is dishonesty inevitable, or can doctors and patients do better? In a nationally representative survey, ZocDoc teamed up with award-winning research firm Kelton Global to learn:

- Which patients are less honest?
- Why aren't patients always truthful?
- How can doctors support patient honesty?

Which patients are less honest?

All patients struggle to be honest with doctors – especially **women** and **young people**.

Women are more likely than men to tell white lies or omit truths.

Both women and men are dishonest with their doctors – but women significantly more so than men.

- **30%** of women have fibbed to a doctor, compared to 23% of men.
- **1 in 5** women would rather confess bad health behaviors to a manicurist or hairstylist.
- **25%** percent of women go to a partner with health concerns before speaking with a doctor.

Younger patients are less honest than older patients.

The doctor-patient relationship seems to become more honest as patients get older.

- Millennials are **45%** more likely than older counterparts (22% vs. 12%) to confide in a trusted beauty or fitness professional instead of a doctor.
- Only 39% of patients aged 35-44 turn to a doctor first when feeling unwell. For the age 45-64 cohort, this number increases to 45%. And by 65+ years, it increases to 58 percent.
- Mom or dad is still the first call for **more than a third** (36%) of millennials when they feel unwell.

Why aren't patients always truthful?

For many patients, doctor visits don't allow **time or space** for honesty.

Many patients feel embarrassed in the doctor's office, and have trouble finding the right moment to share. Specifically, patients mention:

- **Lack of perceived support:** Nearly half (46%) of Americans have avoided telling their doctor about a health issue because they were embarrassed or afraid of being judged.
- **Lack of time:** More than a quarter (27%) report withholding details because they couldn't find the right opportunity or didn't have enough time during the appointment.
- **Lack of prompting:** A third (32%) say the doctor didn't ask any questions or specifically if anything was bothering them.

How can doctors support patient honesty?

Providers should open **more channels of communication** and **address patient concerns**.

Digital tools and bedside manner can support patient honesty.

The doctor-patient relationship isn't confined to the exam room. Healthcare providers can take important steps to facilitate honest communication before, during, and after the visit.

- **Before the appointment:** Offer online check-in forms so patients have time to comfortably contemplate what they'd like to share before meeting you – and to share things in writing that they might be embarrassed to say out loud. Make patients more comfortable at your practice with an online profile that shares your background and qualifications, pictures of your office, and a professional statement.
- **During the visit:** Be affirming! Let patients know that you're not going to judge them and remind them to be as honest as possible. Try to build time into each visit for open-ended questions and answers.
- **After the appointment:** Request feedback from your patients with seamless online reviews. The more comfortable patients are with your bedside manner, the more likely they are to open up and share important health details.

Conclusion

The doctor-patient relationship is like any other relationship: it needs honesty to thrive. Without open, forthright communication, healthcare providers may struggle to understand their patients' lifestyles, make accurate diagnoses, and recommend proper treatment.

And while some little white lies may be unavoidable, this study shows that there is good news: Doctors can take simple steps to facilitate better communication with patients.

Equipped with a better understanding of the patient perspective, healthcare providers of all stripes can conscientiously employ digital tools, conversational tactics, and practice management techniques that encourage honesty – and may create the better health outcomes sought by patients and doctors alike.