

Dear Doctor,

Our survey of 1,000 Americans reveals that we want more meaningful relationships with our doctors. *Prevention* shows how to get them.

PLUS:
10 things your doctor wants you to know



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Do we have a health care crisis on our hands?

Primary care doctors used to be our trusted friends, our confidants, our saviors. A warm relationship with our doctor was seen as a cornerstone of good health care and even our own health. Today, that relationship is in jeopardy. Does this mean our health care is compromised? Not necessarily. But it does mean that the way we think about our health, combined with a changing health care system, may be creating a less-personalized level of care.

According to an exclusive *Prevention* survey, half of Americans go to the doctor only when they're sick (rather than for checkups or routine tests), and

1 in 5 of us didn't visit a doctor at all in the past 12 months. In addition, some 17% acknowledge that they don't have a "main doctor." And that figure rises to 28% when you're considering just the under-40 crowd. "Health insurance changes have disrupted doctor-patient relationships, and some people haven't sought out new physicians yet or have just recently found one," says Harlan Krumholz, a cardiologist and health care researcher at Yale University. "Younger people may delay longer because they don't have any major health issues yet."

Relatively recent doctor-patient relationships are common; 29% of Americans who sought medical care in the past year (from here on, these Americans are referred to as "patients") have been with their main doctor for 2 years or less. For younger patients, the likelihood that they've been seeing their doctor for 2 years or less rises to 44%.

That doctor, considered by patients to be their main doctor, is probably a general practitioner, cited by 75% of respondents. Only 10% named a specialist.

"More changes are on the horizon, as we're shifting from offices with a couple of doctors to team-based group practices, where doctors come and go and you may not even be designated a specific physician," says Krumholz. With shorter appointments and the lack of a personal relationship, these practices are heading away from what Americans want, according to our survey: a more personal connection to their doctor.

What You Want in a Doctor

Here, 4 things on our survey respondents' wish list:

1 A Long-Term Relationship

92% would like to have the same doctor over many years, although almost a third admit they've been seeing their main doctor for just 2 years or less.

OUR ADVICE: Look for a doctor in a two- or three-person practice. If you do go to a larger practice, request to see the same doctor every visit, even though you might have less flexibility in scheduling appointments, says Linda Adler, CEO of Pathfinders Medical,

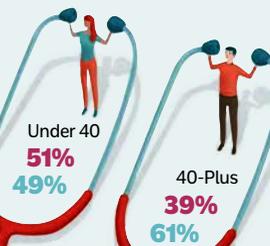
a patient advocacy organization.

Also help ensure continuity by requesting a copy of your electronic medical records from each of your doctors. By law you're entitled to those records, which contain lab results, medication history, and other vital information about your health. If you do see several different doctors, try to use one pharmacy for all your prescriptions. A single pharmacy can keep track of your medications and alert you if there may be harmful drug interactions.

DOES BEDSIDE MANNER MATTER?

Survey respondents under 40 are almost evenly split on the value of a good bedside manner versus above-average medical skills. But **57% overall** indicate that given a choice of just one, they'd prefer the **highly skilled doc** who lacks a good bedside manner over the opposite.

■ Manner
■ Medical Skill



EXPERTS SAY

"Ideally, you want both, but there's a lot to be said for a good bedside manner. Being sick is scary, and when you're making high-stakes decisions, you want someone who cares."
—Lisa Schwartz, a professor of medicine at Dartmouth Geisel School of Medicine

PATIENTS SAY

"I don't have to live with him; I just need him to help me to live longer if I have a health problem."
—Teresa Peacher Mele, on Facebook

"I'll take medical acumen over bedside manner. I want the right diagnosis, treatment, and care plan. Bedside manner is appreciated but insufficient on its own."
—Don Goldmann, Institute for Healthcare Improvement

2 Same-Day Appointments

80% say it's important to be able to see a doctor quickly if need be.

OUR ADVICE: Ask the office if it has “open scheduling”—which means the office keeps some slots open for last-minute visits. It's fairly common among primary care physicians. When you need to see a specialist immediately, make your case sound as compelling as possible. “Stress the urgency of your appointment. If you think your mole looks like cancer, let the staff know,” says Don Goldmann, chief scientific officer emeritus at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. “Having your primary care doctor's office make the appointment on your behalf can help, too.”

3 Familiarity With Your Medical History

81% wish the doctor knew their medical background without consulting their chart.

OUR ADVICE: Primary care doctors

want to remember you, but they have 2,300 patients on average, says Pamela Wible, a family doctor in Eugene, OR. They will have to consult your chart, but you can make the most of the time you have by getting organized before your visit. Make a list of the issues you want to discuss and your ideal outcomes for each. “Patients who are proactive and organized can cover twice as much in an appointment, compared with patients who are unprepared,” says Wible.

4 Awareness of Your Personal Life

67% want their doctor to know their life details.

OUR ADVICE: Stand out to your doctor by writing a thank-you note after your visit. Wible suggests you add medical details such as, “I appreciated how clearly you explained my test results,” or add a personal detail to remind her of you, such as “I'm grateful that you could see me before my trip to Yellowstone.”

“I Like My Doctor, But...”

1 in 5 patients in the survey expressed **FRUSTRATION** with the doctor they see most often because:

She Shows Up Late.

OUR ADVICE: Book the first appointment in the morning or the first one after lunch, when offices tend to be on schedule, says Wible. “Your doctor is probably fresher at these times, too,” she says, noting that one study found that gastroenterologists are 20% more likely to detect colon polyps before 11:00 AM than later in the day. Avoid Monday appointments because docs are still managing lab results and patient messages that came in over the weekend.

She Rushes the Appointment.

OUR ADVICE: Ask how long your appointment will be when you're booking it, says Adler. If the receptionist says you have only the “standard” 10-minute slot and you think you'll need more time, let her know you'll need another visit to address the remainder of your concerns. Some doctors will agree to a follow-up phone call or e-mail.

“I would appreciate it if my doctor would take his eyes off his laptop and engage in a conversation with me.”

—Sabrina Boston
on Facebook



Stand out to your doctor by writing a thank-you note after your visit, advises family doctor Pamela Wible.

The Age Divide

Survey respondents ages 40-plus and those under 40 diverged on a number of answers.

Older respondents are about 25% more likely to get **regular checkups and screenings** than younger adults. Go to cdc.gov/prevention to see what tests you need by age and gender.

Younger respondents are more than twice as likely to use **at-home medical tests**, such as those for urinary tract infections or strep throat. Ask your doctor whether she'd accept the findings of these tests and prescribe a medication to you based on the results or if an office visit is required.

Almost half (47%) of those under 40 think **searching for symptoms online** does more harm than good, compared with 39% of older patients. If you want to search, make sure you do your research on reputable sites. Skip Google and head to cdc.gov and university-based hospital websites.

Twice as many respondents under 40 have tried a **video visit with their doctor**, but the overall numbers are still small. Just 7% of those under 40

have given virtual appointments a try, though undoubtedly the numbers will rise. "Virtual medicine is booming in New York City and San Francisco," says Adler. Half of physicians' groups offer this service, according to the American Telemedicine Association. Adler advises that it's best used for minor problems like skin rashes, pollen allergies, and sore throats. Ask your doctor if her practice offers this service.



Prevention survey source: January 2018 nationally representative GfK KnowledgePanel survey of 1,001 US adults ages 18-plus, as well as an oversample to reach 1,004 patients who in past year visited an MD's office (general practitioner or specialist), urgent care/walk-in clinic, or homeopath/other alternative medicine practitioner or had an online/virtual MD visit. The margin of error for the poll is +/-3 percentage points.

What Doctors Want You to Know

MDs spoke their minds on the subject.

"It's our job to help you. You don't need to apologize for not shaving your legs or gaining weight. But we would like you to be honest with us—whether it's answering questions about your sexual practices or admitting you didn't take the medication we prescribed during the last appointment. We need the truth to treat you best."

—**Jennifer Caudle**, a family physician and an associate professor at Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine

"I make mistakes and will try to let you know and make it right when I do so. I also try to 'walk my talk.' But words can hurt me, too. Please remember that before you berate us or our staff."

—**Jennifer Caudle**

"We see [getting a second opinion] as a positive and constructive thing to do. Most of us get a second opinion, too, when we're the patient."

—**Alan J. Christensen**, a professor of psychology and brain sciences at the University of Iowa

"When well-meaning patients say things like, 'You're so much better than my last doctor; he was such an idiot,' it's incredibly uncomfortable. I want to be the best doctor I can, but I also recognize that all my colleagues are trying to do the same. When I hear a patient disparaging another doctor, I know they could do the same to me."

—**Holly Phillips**, an internist in New York City

"Some people think that we're in the insurance companies' pockets. The truth: We spend almost half of our workday on administrative work, including time on authorizations for my patients' medications, treatments, and procedures to be covered, and advocating for our patients."

—**Catherine Forest**, a family medicine physician at Stanford Health Care in California

"Even though we're always crunched for time, I love hearing about how your daughter is the lead in her school play. The better we know you, the better we can take care of you. I don't mind sharing a bit about myself, either. The doctor-patient relationship is like any other: Sharing humanizes each person and builds trust."

—**Holly Phillips**

"Let your doctor know if you can't get in to see a specialist or if a test can't be scheduled. If doctors don't hear from you, we may mistakenly assume that things are going OK."

—**Craig Pollack**, an associate professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore

"It's important to share your bucket list for the year with your doctor so [he] can better understand your goals and help you achieve them. One of my cancer patients wants to do a 7-day fishing trip in the Sierras. He and I are working to get his symptoms under control so he will be able to take the trip."

—**VJ Periyakoil**, director of palliative care education and training at Stanford University School of Medicine