

# Personal & Sexual Boundary Violations

The College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) provides advice to Albertans to support improved patient care and safety. This advice does not define a standard of practice, nor should it be interpreted as legal advice.

Patient FAQs are dynamic and may be edited or updated for clarity at any time. Please refer back to these articles regularly to ensure you are aware of the most recent advice.

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We all put a lot of trust in our doctors to take care of our health and act in our best interest. Everyone deserves to feel respected during a medical appointment, safe enough to ask questions and empowered to speak up if something doesn't seem right. The information below should help clarify what is and is not appropriate behaviour from a doctor.

## What is the difference between sexual abuse and sexual misconduct?

It is sometimes necessary for a doctor to place their hands on your body during a medical exam. When this happens, your doctor should always ask for permission first and clearly explain the nature of the exam so you know what to expect. This should never be sexual in nature.

**Any** contact of a sexual nature between a doctor and a patient is **sexual abuse**. This includes:

- sexual relations of any kind; or
- touching your genitals, breasts, buttocks or pelvic area when doing so is **not** required as part of your medical exam.

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**Sexual misconduct** includes any objectionable or unwanted behaviour from your doctor that is sexual and inappropriate, such as:

- making sexually suggestive jokes or remarks;
- asking personal, sexualized questions that are not required as part of your medical exam;
- asking you out on a date; or
- making sexualized comments about your body or appearance.

People often seek health care when they are at their most vulnerable—a lot of trust is put in doctors, to take care of their patients and act in their best interest. Sexual abuse or misconduct by your doctor is a serious betrayal of that trust and not acceptable under any circumstances.

## What is and is not appropriate during a medical exam?

When you visit the doctor, any physical exams and questions asked must be related to your health care needs. Your doctor has a responsibility to keep you informed every step of the way during a medical exam, with clear communication about what they're doing and why. If at **any** point you are uncertain or uncomfortable, it is your right to stop the exam and ask for clarification.

## My doctor asked me to undress for an examination. Is this appropriate?

When asking you to undress, your doctor must provide clean, adequate draping to cover yourself with until the exam is over and should never ask you to expose body parts unrelated to your health concern without explaining why.

If you are asked to disrobe for an examination, your doctor should always explain why you're being asked to undress to ensure you understand and give you the chance to ask questions. If the doctor does not explain, ask why you need to undress. Before you consent to any medical exam, it is important that you understand its full extent so that you can make an informed decision.

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## **My doctor stayed in the room while I changed. Is that normal?**

Your doctor must leave the room when you are dressing and undressing (unless you specifically ask for assistance).

## **Can I have someone else in the room with me during a medical exam?**

You absolutely have the right to request a third party (like a spouse, a friend, a nurse, or a trained medical chaperone) be in the room during an exam if it would make you feel more comfortable. If you ask for a chaperone and there isn't one available, or if you are in any way uncomfortable, you have the right to stop the exam and ask that it be rescheduled.

## **My doctor asked me very personal questions about my life. Is this appropriate?**

To better understand your health care needs and provide you with the best care possible, your doctor may ask personal questions (about your job, support system, activities, lifestyle and sexual activity) but they should always be related to your care. If you are unsure why you're being asked these questions, ask your doctor to clarify why that information is needed. Communication between a patient and their doctor should be open, honest and based on clearly established boundaries that you set.

## **During my exam, my doctor's hand brushed against an intimate area (e.g., breast, buttocks, etc.)— I'm not sure if the touch was an accident or intentional. What should I do?**

Medical exams require patients to be in close proximity to their doctors and unintentional contact can happen. If you feel comfortable doing so, start a conversation with your doctor. A positive physician-patient relationship is based on trust, and your doctor should always be open to addressing any concerns you have. If you are not satisfied with the outcome of that conversation, or you are uncertain whether your doctor's behaviour was appropriate, call a [CPSA Patient Advocate](#) for advice on what to do next.

## **Boundaries and appropriate communication**

### **My doctor is contacting me after my appointment. Is this okay?**

Contacting patients (e.g., phone, text, email) after an appointment is okay as long as it is done for medical purposes and isn't overly personal. For example, your doctor may reach

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out to share test results, book a follow-up appointment or, if your health concerns warrant it, to check in on your overall well-being.

## **Can I give my doctor a gift to show them how much I appreciate their care?**

A simple thank you is the best way to express your gratitude—your doctor will be very happy to know that you’re satisfied with your care. If you’d like to do more, something simple like a card, flowers or homemade items like baked goods are often appreciated. Doctors are not allowed to accept extravagant gifts from their patients.

If your doctor’s office has a “no gifts” policy, it is best to respect this.

## **Personal relationships between doctors and patients**

### **Can I ask my doctor out on a date?**

Your doctor cannot accept romantic advances from you—a doctor who engages in a personal or sexual relationship with a patient is at risk of losing their license to practise medicine. If you ask your doctor on a date, make sexual comments, or touch your doctor inappropriately, your doctor has a professional responsibility to decline these actions. You also shouldn’t look up private, personal information about your doctor: respect your doctor’s privacy as you expect your doctor to respect yours.

### **I’m an adult: why can’t I consent to a personal relationship with my doctor?**

Your doctor is entrusted with very personal information about you and is responsible for your health and well-being which creates a power imbalance that prevents anything other than a professional relationship. This doesn’t mean your doctor can’t be a part of your community—doctors and patients often cross paths in social settings or through business-related activities. There is nothing wrong with friendly interactions, but it is essential to keep your relationship with your doctor professional to maintain the trust necessary for good patient care. If you continue to feel a strong personal attraction to your doctor, you might want to consider transferring your care to another doctor.

### **If I find a new doctor, can I pursue a relationship with my former doctor?**

Based on the inherent power imbalance in all doctor-patient relationships, this is never recommended. There are several factors for doctors to consider, including the type of services provided, the length of time you were a patient, and the minimum time period

after ongoing care stops, not to mention the possibility of permanent revocation of their practise permit if the relationships is considered sexual abuse by the College.

## **We're here to help**

### **What do I do if I think my doctor is being inappropriate?**

If you have any concerns about your doctor's behaviour, please call 1-800-661-4689 and speak with a [CPSA Patient Advocate](#) for advice.

In instances of where there is alleged sexual abuse, patients may also want to consider contacting their local police department.

### **What are the consequences for doctors who engage in sexual abuse or misconduct?**

If a doctor is found to have committed sexual abuse by a College Hearing Tribunal, they will no longer be permitted to practise medicine in Alberta.

A doctor found to have committed sexual misconduct will at minimum have their practice permit suspended, for a period of time determined to be appropriate by a Hearing Tribunal (who can also impose more severe sanctions than a suspension, if warranted). If a doctor's registration and practice permit are cancelled because of sexual misconduct, the doctor cannot apply for reinstatement for at least five years.

Find out more about the College's [complaints and disciplinary process](#).

### **I have more questions. Who can I talk to?**

For advice on maintaining appropriate professional boundaries with your doctor, call 1-800-661-4689 to speak with a [CPSA Patient Advocate](#).

For more information about the [Standards of Practice](#), contact Chantelle Dick, Standards of Practice Coordinator at [chantelle.dick@cpsa.ab.ca](mailto:chantelle.dick@cpsa.ab.ca).