

# Ending the Physician-Patient Relationship

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.

## CONTENTS

Preamble .....	1
Can my physician discharge me from their practice for being rude or disrespectful to them or their staff?.....	2
Can my physician discharge me for asking them to fill out forms?.....	2
Can my physician discharge me because I live too far away?.....	3
Can my physician discharge me if I see another primary care physician?.....	3
Can my physician discharge me because I haven't seen them in a long time? .....	3
Can my physician discharge me for recording my appointment? .....	4
My physician discharged me because their panel is too full: is this allowed? .....	4
If my physician discharges me, do they have to find me a new physician?.....	4
Can CPSA find me a new physician?.....	5
My physician discharged me: what happens to my prescriptions, test results, etc.? .....	5
My physician discharged me: how do I get a copy of my medical records?.....	5
Do I have to pay to get a copy of my records? .....	6
Resources.....	6

## Preamble

Physicians see us at our most vulnerable and sometimes take the brunt of our fear, frustration or anger. Like everyone else, physicians and clinic staff do not have to accept

# Ending the Physician-Patient Relationship

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abusive or threatening actions. You could be discharged from your physician's practice for unacceptable behaviour.

The best way to keep your relationship with your physician functional and courteous is by having respectful, calm conversations. It is perfectly fine to ask questions and try to understand a situation, but it is not acceptable to yell, curse, make threats, get violent, etc.

## Can my physician discharge me from their practice for being rude or disrespectful to them or their staff?

Yes. The [Terminating the Physician-Patient Relationship](#) standard allows physicians to end the relationship if a patient is abusive, threatening or poses a safety risk to the doctor, office staff or other patients.

You could also be discharged if you won't respect professional boundaries (e.g., offering gifts, asking personal questions after being asked to stop, repeatedly being late to appointments, repeatedly missing appointments, contacting the physician on social media, etc.) or if your physician leaves their medical practice because of illness or other urgent circumstance.

In any of these situations, your physician can immediately discharge you as a patient without providing advanced written notice.

## Can my physician discharge me for asking them to fill out forms?

No: completing forms is part of the care physicians provide to their patients (typically within 30 days, which is outlined in CPSA's [Responding to Third Party Requests](#) standard of practice). However, they are permitted to decline the completion of a form as long as they explain why.

For example, it may not be appropriate for a physician at a walk-in clinic who has never provided you care to complete an insurance form.

While physicians understand and appreciate that you need forms completed as soon as possible, they will need enough time to gather information and fill them out properly while still caring for other patients. Your physician may also not be the most appropriate physician to complete the form (e.g., if there is a specialist involved in your care), and they may request that you see another physician so they can add their information to the form.

# Ending the Physician-Patient Relationship

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## Can my physician discharge me because I live too far away?

Generally speaking, no. If you are able and willing to travel to see your doctor, where you live should not be an issue as long as it is in the same province. However, healthcare providers need to be able to assess and manage health concerns in a safe and timely manner. This may not be possible if they are not located near you.

If you are unable to make your appointments on time or can't see your doctor in person when necessary because you are too far away, your doctor may want to explore other care options with you.

## Can my physician discharge me if I see another primary care physician?

It is always best to have one medical "home" with one healthcare provider to keep track of your health, any tests that have been ordered, referrals, etc. When you see more than one primary healthcare provider, it makes it harder for all parties to keep you safe and make sure you get proper care.

Your physician should talk to you to understand why you are seeing another physician (e.g., you needed care when the clinic was closed and went to a walk-in clinic). You should not be discharged for getting care from another healthcare provider when your physician isn't available.

If you see more than one primary care provider, your physician may ask you to choose just one (aside from urgent care needs or healthcare needed while their office is closed). If you continue to see more than one primary care provider, it is possible that your physician may discharge you from their practice.

## Can my physician discharge me because I haven't seen them in a long time?

Generally speaking, no. However, it depends on how long it has been and why you haven't been in to see them. We expect physicians to reach out to patients to find out why (e.g., you've been healthy and haven't needed health care, you found a new physician, you moved away, etc.) before making any decisions about ending the physician-patient relationship.

Physicians do have to follow the [Terminating the Physician-Patient Relationship](#) standard whenever patient care is terminated.

# Ending the Physician-Patient Relationship

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## Can my physician discharge me for recording my appointment?

It depends. Although you can record your conversation, you cannot record anyone else's conversations (e.g., you can record in an exam room but not in the waiting room). However, you should let your physician know before recording them.

If your physician doesn't know or doesn't consent to being recorded, they may feel there has been a breach of trust in the physician-patient relationship. Your physician may also have clinic policies that prohibit the recording of your appointment without their knowledge or consent. These kinds of breaches could harm your relationship with them and result in you being discharged as a patient.

Explain to your physician why you would like to record the appointment and request their consent before starting to record.

## My physician discharged me because their panel is too full: is this allowed?

Yes. If a physician has too many patients and can't provide safe, proper care to all of them, or if there are patients who urgently need care (for example, someone with a new cancer diagnosis), they may need to reduce their number of patients. When deciding which patients will be discharged, physicians have to use their professional judgement and make sure the selection process is fair and considers patients' medical needs.

## If my physician discharges me, do they have to find me a new physician?

No. Your physician needs to give you notice in advance (e.g., 30 days) to try to find another healthcare provider, but they are not responsible for finding another healthcare provider for you.

There are a few ways to find a healthcare provider who is accepting new patients:

- Ask friends or family members if their physicians are accepting new patients
- [Call Health Link](#) at 8-1-1 to speak to an Information and Referral Specialist
- Use the [Alberta Find a Doctor website](#) to get a list of physicians, nurse practitioners and clinics accepting new patients in your area

# Ending the Physician-Patient Relationship

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- Use [CPSA's Physician Directory](#) to find contact information for physicians in your area to call and ask if they are accepting new patients (note: [CPSA's Physician Directory](#) does not have an “accepting new patients” status)

## Can CPSA find me a new physician?

No. CPSA cannot place Albertans with physicians who are accepting new patients. We have access to the same publicly available information as Albertans do through the [Alberta Find a Doctor](#) website.

If you need help navigating the [Alberta Find a Doctor](#) website, you are welcome to contact CPSA's Support Team ([support@cpsa.ca](mailto:support@cpsa.ca)) to help search for you and provide you with contact information so you can contact clinics that may be accepting new patients.

## My physician discharged me: what happens to my prescriptions, test results, etc.?

Your physician needs to make sure you can access care for serious medical conditions, prescription refills and test results. They might provide this care, or they might have a colleague take care of this until the end date of care. This information should be provided to you in the notification letter.

## My physician discharged me: how do I get a copy of my medical records?

The discharge letter from your physician should tell you how you can get a copy of your records or how to get a copy of your records transferred to a new healthcare provider.

Physicians are required by law to keep a copy of your records for at least ten years, and if they did not provide you with information on how to get a copy of your records, you can ask your new healthcare provider to request your records from your previous physician, or you can call the clinic and request the records yourself.

CPSA does not have access to your medical records and cannot make a request on your behalf. If your physician refuses to release your medical records or doesn't provide them within 30 days, you can contact the Office of Information and Privacy Commissioner (OIPC) at 1-888-878-4044 or [generalinfo@oipc.ab.ca](mailto:generalinfo@oipc.ab.ca) for help with gaining access to your medical records.

# Ending the Physician-Patient Relationship

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## Do I have to pay to get a copy of my records?

The [Government of Alberta](#) allows healthcare providers to charge a reasonable fee for making copies of records (e.g., a \$25 administration fee that includes the first 20 pages of your record, plus 25¢ a page for each additional page), as well as charges to review the chart if appropriate). Your former physician should provide you with an estimate of the cost before making a copy so you can decide if you want to pay for it.

If the cost of a copy is too high, your former physician must provide your new healthcare provider with a summary of important medical information at no cost to you.

## Resources

CPSA team members are available if you have questions. Please email [support@cpsa.ca](mailto:support@cpsa.ca) or call 1-800-561-3899.