

What you need to know about patient confidentiality

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What is doctor-patient confidentiality and privacy?

Confidentiality refers to a physician's obligation to protect the information you have given them, and to ensure that information is only accessible to those authorized to have access. Physicians have a responsibility to ensure the security of your information in their care, including in their offices, emails, records as well as with their office staff.

Confidentiality should allow you to feel comfortable giving your medical history and explaining symptoms to your physician.

What is Privacy?

Privacy refers to your right to control who has access to your personal information and under what circumstances. Your information should not be disclosed to others unless you have given informed consent.

What is Consent?

Consent is an informed voluntary agreement with what is being done or what is being proposed. Your consent can be either expressed or implied.

Consent must be obtained without deception or coercion.

Where is confidential patient information kept?

Your patient health information is kept in a medical record, which is a record of information in any form or in any medium (written, printed, photographic, electronic or otherwise). This is all the information provided by you that contributes to establishing a diagnosis and treatment plan. It may also contain reports, investigation results and correspondence from other health professionals. The contents of the medical record belong to you and you must provide consent in order to share this information with others, including health care providers, social agencies, police, lawyers, insurance companies and family members, with few exceptions.

What is a breach of confidentiality?

Confidentiality is breached when your personal health information is released by the physician without your consent. Breaches of confidentiality are considered serious, and each province has specific ways to address this concern, either through the provincial college of physicians and surgeons, or through the provincial privacy office.