

Tallahassee.com

5 lies we tell our doctors

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1:04 PM, Sep. 14, 2011|

You're sitting on a paper-covered exam table, waiting for your checkup. You know the doctor will ask if you're eating right, getting rest or taking your medications. Do you tell the truth, or come up with a cover story?

Most of us have lied to our doctors at one time or another. Maybe we just want to avoid a lecture. Or we're actually in denial about a serious problem. But don't kid yourself: Doctors usually know when we're fibbing. We asked a few people in the white coats about the white lies they hear the most, and why it's OK — and important — to fess up.

1. LIFESTYLE LIES: SMOKING, DRINKING AND DRUGS

Yes, your doctor will probably tell you to quit smoking (anything) or to moderate your drinking. But without this information, they're flying blind on your health care. In fact, doctors are taught to double whatever their patients say is their intake — i.e., if you claim to have three drinks a week, your physician will calculate it's probably six. Doctors should work to ease those awkward conversations, says Dr. Jonathan Appelbaum, director of internal medicine education at the Florida State University School of Medicine. "We can't be judgmental. We have to create an environment where the patient feels comfortable telling us all the facts. It may take a couple of visits."

2. DOCTOR'S ORDERS

Doc gives you guidelines for diet and exercise. You haven't quite followed through, but you lie that you have. Surprise — a doctor like Gaby Cora is going to see through it. "If the lie is obvious, I may use humor, we may both laugh about it, and I prompt my patient to come clean," said Dr. Cora, a physician and wellness coach. "If the lying is malicious, I let the patient go: I only work with people who appreciate the help." It's not funny, though, when the doctor believes that a plan isn't working. Sending her on a wild goose chase could mean costly tests or unnecessary medicines.

3. MEDICATION LIES: TOO MUCH, TOO LITTLE OR "BORROWING"

Medicine comes with directions for good reason, Dr. Appelbaum says. If you lie about how you're taking maintenance meds, such as for blood pressure or a thyroid condition, the doctor could make unneeded changes. "Or it could conflict with what you're already taking," Dr. Appelbaum said. That's why you should also keep your mitts off someone else's meds. You should also tell your doctor everything else you're taking, to avoid harmful interactions. According to a 2008 study that appeared in the Journal of the

American Medical Association, about one in 25 people ages 57 to 85 are combining prescription drugs and over-the-counter remedies and supplements that should never go together.

4. SEX, LIES, AND THE DOCTOR

Talking about your sexual past and present with your doctor is about as comfortable as telling your mom. But it's vital to your overall picture of health — more so for women who want to get pregnant or already are. A 2004 survey of WebMD users revealed that 17 percent of nearly 1,500 respondents had lied to their doctors about sex, and 1 percent also lied about abortions or earlier pregnancies. Younger people were more likely to shade the sexual truth. (See sidebar for more on the survey.) If you fear you've contracted a sexually transmitted disease, remember that most can be treated easily if caught early. Your sexual health affects not just you, but all of your partners. So don't dodge the truth, or treatment, on this one.

5. LIES OF OMISSION

We play down symptoms or withhold information on pre-existing conditions. And Dr. Appelbaum says he sees more people trying to self-diagnose on the Internet to avoid the time and cost of an office visit. But it's best to let the doctor do her job and determine whether your chest pains are heartburn or heart disease. When a patient isn't forthcoming, Dr. Cora says, she tries to encourage them to come clean — not for her sake, but their own. "I help the person realize how their finagling the truth hurts them in the long run."

Fessing up on fibbing

It's the most popular medical site on the Internet, and yet nearly half of its readers — people who are actively seeking information about their health — admit they have lied to their doctors. In 2004, WebMD surveyed about 1,500 of its users about whether they have fibbed to a physician, and why. Some 13 percent owned up to telling lies, while another 32 percent admitted they haven't told the whole truth. Here were the top five categories of lies, and the number of patients who admitted telling them:

v Following doctors' orders: 38 percent

v Diet and exercise: 32 percent

v Smoking: 22 percent

v Drinking alcohol: 16 percent

v Sex: 17 percent

Why do we do it? Half of those who lied said they didn't want to be judged. Almost a third did it out of embarrassment over the truth. And 21 percent "didn't think the doctor would understand." Several other reasons were listed, including this troubling statistic: 6 percent lied to get a drug or treatment they wanted.