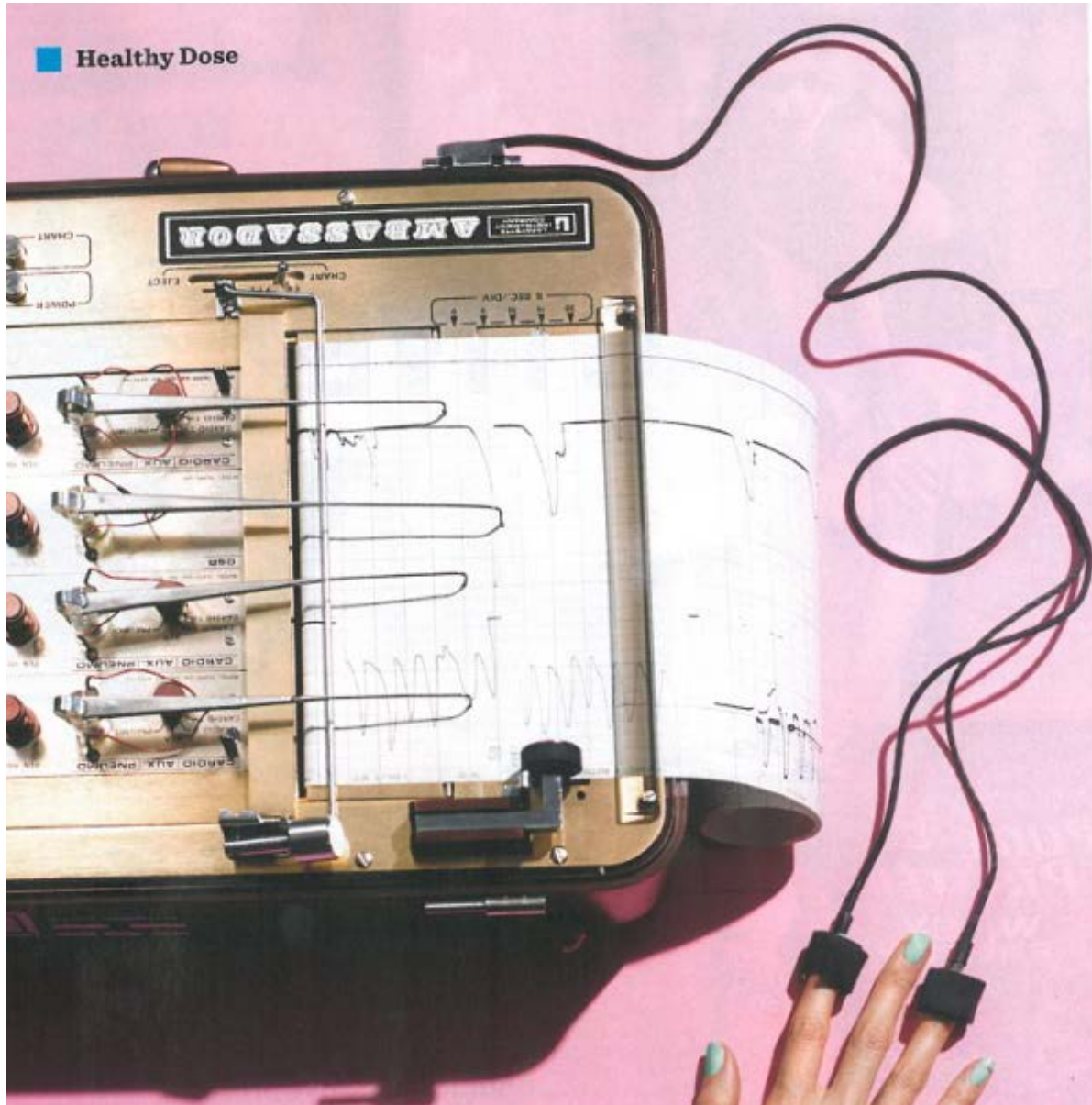


Healthy Dose



7 Lies We Tell Our Doctors

It's a strange phenomenon: We fib about our behavior to the exact people who could help steer us in a better direction. Read on to hear why—and how—you should always fess up.

By Jessica Girdwain

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In theory, your doctor's office is a safe place to lay it all out there: your health triumphs, your health lapses, your nagging health concerns. But many women omit details, twist facts, or blatantly lie when being grilled by an M.D. Big mistake. Withholding the truth can be dangerous, if not deadly. "And your doctor can't help you if she doesn't have all the info," says women's-health expert Jennifer Ashton, M.D. Guilty of any of these little white-gown lies? It's time to come clean.

YOUR DOCTOR ASKS:

"How are you doing?"

YOU SAY: "Good! Fine! Everything's just fine."

THE REALITY: You've been feeling sad for a while.

THE FIB RISK: High. The longer you let depression symptoms linger, the more likely you are to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs, or to isolate yourself from friends and family. Don't suffer in silence: "Try to say exactly what you're thinking and experiencing, even if you don't have the right words," says clinical psychologist Sari Shepphird, Ph.D. "Or if you're too nervous, just say that. Your doctor can take it from there."

Remember, just because you feel blue doesn't mean you are clinically depressed or will surely be prescribed meds (nearly 25 percent of people hide their symptoms for fear of being put on an

antidepressant). Hormonal imbalances can also cause emotional upset. Give your physician the chance to get to the root of your mood and recommend a course of action that you're comfortable with.

YOUR DOCTOR ASKS:

"Do you smoke?"

YOU SAY: "Not really. Maybe every once in a while."

THE REALITY: You puff at least once a day, or sometimes several times a week.

THE FIB RISK: High. OK, so you don't feel like hearing another lecture, but just one social cig exposes your body to a cocktail of carcinogens. Frequent smoking raises your risk for certain cancers (lung, breast, cervical), so your doctor might want to start screening for them early or more often, says Lynn Westphal, M.D., director

of women's health at Stanford University. Smoking can also raise your blood-clot risk if you're on the Pill, so your physician might switch you to another form of birth control and explain how cigarettes affect fertility.

Always be straight about how often you light up, and your doctor can work with you to devise a solid quitting plan. It's well worth any shame: Women who stop smoking cut their premature death rate by more than half.

YOUR DOCTOR ASKS:

"What's new in your life?"

YOU SAY: "Not much. Same old, same old."

THE REALITY: You were recently laid off or passed over for a big promotion, or you're just working around the clock.

THE FIB RISK: Moderate.

Because the average working woman spends a third of her time at work, her job health has a direct effect on her medical health. A little professional stress is totally normal; an upheaval at (or exit from) the office, however, is something your doctor needs to know about.

"Many people don't know that work-related stress is the root cause of a lot of health problems," says Shepphird. For example, unemployment has been linked to heart disease, and extreme stress can make you 69 percent more likely to misuse birth control, leaving you vulnerable to unplanned pregnancies or STDs.

When your physician asks "What's new?" be sure to touch on what's happening at work (as in: it feels like you're



Blurring the facts is a very unhealthy habit.

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under tremendous pressure on the job). She can decide what's relevant.

YOUR DOCTOR ASKS: "How often do you drink?"

YOU SAY: "Socially, and only on weekends."

THE REALITY: Well...and at a handful of happy hours each week.

THE FIB RISK: High. Most women grossly understate how much they imbibe, often more than even they realize: "Thanks to oversized glasses and generous pours, two drinks may really contain the alcohol equivalent of four drinks," says Ashton. "And four drinks in one night is considered binge drinking."

Regularly guzzling more than seven drinks a week can lead to sleep disruption, weight gain, or even breast cancer, so it's imperative to do the math. Don't fall back on the vague "socially" answer or downplay your boozing for fear of being tsk-tsked; use your datebook as a guide, and clue in your doctor so she can check you for booze-related issues.

YOUR DOCTOR ASKS: "Is your knee still bothering you?"

YOU SAY: "It's all right. I take OTC meds a few times a week."

THE REALITY: You're popping 'em like candy so you can get through your workouts.

THE FIB RISK: Moderate.

Overuse of pain pills can cause stomach irritation or ulcers. Perhaps more important, though, is that the meds may be masking a worsening problem (that knee pain, for example, could morph into a stress fracture), says orthopedic surgeon Sabrina Strickland, M.D., of the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City.

Women often lie about how much they exercise when injured, she says, for fear of being told they can't hit the gym. But it's important to describe your precise fitness routine and type of pain. Sure, being up-front might result in some physical therapy, but that sure beats stomach trauma or eventual surgery—two things your M.D. wants to help you avoid.

YOUR DOCTOR ASKS: "How's your sex life?"

YOU SAY: "Umm...it's OK."

THE REALITY: Nooky kinda hurts, but only sometimes. And you'd rather chew off your arm than go into the ultra-intimate details.

THE FIB RISK: Moderate.

Up to 75 percent of women experience painful sex at some point. Typically, it indicates a fixable issue (vaginal dryness, a yeast infection). In some cases, though, it can point to more serious concerns such as endometriosis or ovarian cysts, so speak up before your feet are in the stirrups. Feel free to start with, "This is awkward, but..." Keep in mind that there's very little that can shock or embarrass a doctor. "Blood, fluids... we've seen and heard everything," says Ashton.

YOUR DOCTOR ASKS: "What medications are you on?"

YOU SAY: "None." Or: "Just birth control."

THE REALITY: You're a supplement champ, taking vitamin D, fish oil, probiotics, and, oh yeah, St.-John's-wort. **THE FIB RISK:** Moderate. They may be all-natural, but health supplements can be very powerful drugs, says Leslie Mendoza Temple, M.D., of the Integrative Medicine Program at NorthShore University HealthSystem in Illinois. Certain ones might interact with prescription medications (e.g., St.-John's-wort can interfere with birth control) or can be harmful in high amounts (excessive fish oil can cause skin bruising or bleeding after surgery).

To make sure you don't overlook anything, bring along the actual bottles of each supplement you're taking to show your M.D. "People sometimes fear their conventional doctors will ridicule alternative therapies," says Temple. If yours laughs at them, find a new doctor. ■

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THE DOCTOR IS IN

What is it about coffee that seems to cure a headache?

—Courtney, Birmingham, AL

There are two theories. The first: A headache happens when the body releases adenosine, a chemical that inflames blood vessels, causing throbbing and pain. The caffeine in coffee puts the kibosh on adenosine and helps constrict blood vessels. The second theory posits that caffeine increases the effectiveness of pain relievers, helping the body absorb them more quickly for faster relief. Hence, many pain pills contain caffeine, and that's why popping Advil with your joe can help your noggin.

My gums bleed whenever I floss. Is it gingivitis?

—Kristina, Orlando, FL

Most likely, yes. Gingivitis, or inflammation of the gums, is super common and rarely painful, so not all sufferers realize they're affected. If you just see tiny spots of blood when flossing, you can usually clear up the problem by sticking to excellent dental hygiene (flossing regularly and brushing your teeth for at least two minutes twice a day) and rinsing with salt water once a day. If the blood keeps coming, see your dentist, stat. In advanced cases, gingivitis can spread into the bones.

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WomensHealthMag.com/Experts to ask your questions.



Preparation Rx

Following this five-point checklist before your next appointment will help keep you honest and on track, says Leana Wen, M.D., author of *When Doctors Don't Listen*.

> **TAKE A FEW MINUTES TO REFLECT.** What has happened since your last visit? Have you changed schools or jobs, or been in or out of relationships? Have you switched up your eating habits or lost or gained a bunch of weight?

> **TAKE SPECIFIC STOCK OF YOURSELF.** Stand in front of a mirror and work your way up, starting with your feet. For each body part, ask yourself, "Does everything feel OK here?" Then scan your mood: Have you been more down than up lately? More stressed than not?

> **JOT DOWN ANY RED FLAGS.** Bring a written list and keep your comments specific—"I've had a headache every day for three weeks" instead of "My head's been hurting"—and read them verbatim.

> **PREPARE TO DIVE RIGHT IN.** Many women only break out their questions at the end of the appointment. Whip out your list right away, before you get sidetracked—and so you don't run out of time.

> **BRING A BUDDY.** If you tend to get flustered or are anxious about a big appointment (say, a cancer screening), a friend can help take notes and ask follow-up questions. She can also make sure you stay honest about your health habits.