

Your Health Care Privacy: A Guide for Teens Under 18

As a teen you're starting to take more responsibility for your health. Part of that means having private, one-on-one time with your health care team.



Why Privacy Matters

During private time with your provider, you can ask questions, share concerns, or talk about things like mental health, relationships, or sexual health.

- **Judgment-free time to talk about your health.** Your provider's job is to answer your questions, give you facts, and tell you about your care options—without judging you.
- **A confidential space to talk openly.** Some of the things you may talk about with your health care provider during this time stay private. **This is called confidentiality;** more on that below.
- **A chance to take charge of your health.** Private, judgment-free time with your provider helps you learn how to make decisions about your own health.

Laws in Washington

Your rights to consent to care: In Washington, teens can [say yes to some health care](#) on their own. This is called giving consent.

You have the right to confidentiality for any service you can legally consent to on your own. This includes any medical notes, treatments, medicines, and lab results.

Here's what care you can consent to on your own:

- **Any age:** Emergency medical services, birth control, and abortion care.
- **Starting at age 13:** Mental health diagnosis, treatment, and prescriptions, therapy, crisis intervention, and substance use disorder treatment.
- **Starting at age 14:** Testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Find an [STI testing clinic](#).

Most other care still needs a parent or guardian's permission. Things like yearly checkups, sports physicals, sick visits, vaccines, or care for a chronic health condition like diabetes or asthma.

There are some situations when your provider has to break confidentiality.

By law, health care providers are considered **mandated reporters**. This means they must report to authorities and your parents or guardians, if:

- You intend to harm yourself or someone else.
- They suspect child abuse or neglect.
- They learn you've had sex with [someone not appropriate based on their age](#) compared to yours.

Providers must also report infectious disease cases like measles, food poisoning (foodborne illness), and some STIs like chlamydia or gonorrhea to your county public health department. Public health uses this information to prevent the spread of disease. This information stays secure and is not shared with your parents or guardians.

■ **Quick tip:** Check out this [poster on health care rights for youth](#).



What to Expect at the Clinic

Check-In and Registration

- **Contact information:** Staff may ask for your phone number or email. This helps them reach you directly if they need to discuss private health information.
- **Forms:** You may be asked to complete forms that ask about personal or sensitive health topics. Clinic staff will encourage you to complete them on your own, and you can ask to keep them private.
- **Patient portal:** You may also get your own patient portal account, separate from your parent's. Ask staff to explain how it works and what information is available.

You can ask to keep your patient portal account login private. If you share your login information with your parents or guardians, they may be able to see your health information. They can usually get their own “proxy” account instead, which shows them some of your health information but not anything confidential.

Ask your health care team exactly what stays private on your portal account.

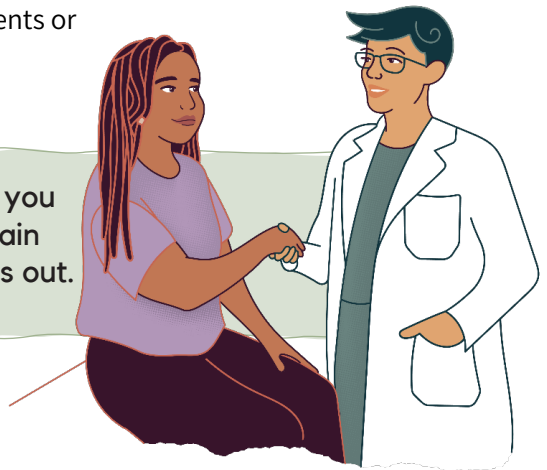
 **Quick tip:** Write down your questions before your appointment, so you remember what you want to ask.



Going to the Exam Room

- **Getting vital signs on your own:** Sometimes, staff will call you to the exam room alone first, without your parent or guardian. During this time, they might take your vital signs like temperature, blood pressure, height, and weight, and ask you about your mood, safety, health habits, or identity. Know that you don't have to talk to anyone alone; you never have to answer any questions you aren't comfortable answering.
- **Your parents or guardian can join for the start:** After this initial private time, your parents or guardians may join you for the start of the visit. If you prefer, you can always ask that your parents or guardians stay with you for the whole appointment.

✦ **Quick tip:** If private time makes you nervous, ask your provider to explain what it means before your adult steps out.



During the Visit

- **One-on-one time:** Most teen visits include some private time with your health care provider. You can talk about anything on your mind—no topic is off limits. Your provider may also ask you specific questions about your health.
- **What's confidential:** Your provider will explain what stays private and what they are required by law to share. If they don't explain this, you have the right to ask.

- **Your parents or guardian can rejoin at the end:** At the end of the visit, your parent or guardian will usually come back in, so everyone hears the provider's recommendations together.

 **Quick tip:** Ask your provider what they are required to share by law before you talk about personal health details.



After the Visit

- **Contact information:** Staff may ask for your contact information to reach you about test results or follow-up care for anything confidential.
- **Privacy for related services:** Services connected to care you can legally consent to also stay private, like lab results and prescriptions for an STI or mental health needs, and after-visit summaries. Ask your provider how to keep these confidential. **Important:** You may need to contact each place involved, like the pharmacy, your insurance, or the lab, to ask them to keep your information private.
- **Medical records:** Ask your provider about who has access to your medical records and online portal, how to limit access if needed, or how to grant access to a parent or guardian when you want to. Your parent or guardian should not be able to see notes or details about care you can consent to on your own.
- **Health insurance:** You may need to ask your health insurance plan not to send statements to your parent or guardian. Your provider can help, or you can call your insurance company directly—the customer service number is

typically on the back of your insurance card. This request can take a few weeks to process, so it might not work for last-minute appointments. Learn [how to ask your health insurance plan to keep your information private](#).



Quick tip: If you're worried about privacy, ask your health care provider, "Will my parent be able to see this on the portal?"



- **Billing and payment:** If you received confidential services and chose not to use your parent's or guardian's health insurance, you are responsible for paying any cost your health insurance doesn't cover. Ask clinic staff for details about billing. Be sure to tell them if you can't pay—there are low-cost and no-cost options available for confidential services. For example:
 - **Sexual and reproductive health services:** Visit a clinic in the Department of Health's Sexual and Reproductive Health Network using [the clinic finder](#) or enroll in Apple Health [Family Planning Only](#).
 - **Any type of confidential services:** Visit a local community health center or federally qualified health center and ask for services on a sliding scale.

What to Do If...

You think your confidentiality was breached

- Contact your provider's office right away. Let them know what happened and ask about next steps.
- If you think health insurance caused the breach, you can [file a complaint](#) with the Office of the Insurance Commissioner.

 **Quick tip:** Check out [this video about keeping your health care visit confidential](#).



You aren't sure what your privacy rights are for care at school

- Before you share sensitive information, talk to your school nurse or counselor about your privacy rights for physical or mental health care at school, including what they must share with parents and guardians. Privacy rules at K-12 school campuses are different from health care facilities.
- If you are concerned about privacy, ask your school nurse or counselor for help you find confidential care outside of school.
- You can also ask your school nurse or counselor to help you talk to your parents or guardians.

- School-based health centers operated by a medical sponsor, like a hospital or clinic, must follow the same confidentiality laws as other health care facilities. However, not all of them offer confidential services.

You don't feel like you're being treated fairly or being heard

- Ask your provider more questions to clarify and repeat back what you hear to catch any misunderstandings.
- Write down your questions and concerns before your appointment. Share them with your provider at the start of the visit. Then write down their answers to keep a record for yourself.
- Speak up and advocate for yourself. Your providers' job is to care for you. If you don't feel heard, say so—you can also ask to see a different provider (you may have to schedule another appointment).
- Bring along a trusted adult.
- Ask for a patient advocate. Most hospitals and health systems have one available. For behavioral health concerns, contact a [behavioral health advocate](#).
- File a complaint with the [Washington State Medical Commission](#) or the [Department of Health](#), depending on your provider.



Talking to Your Parents or Guardians

Parents and guardians can be a big source of support and guidance. They can also help you navigate health care.

You can include them in your health care without sharing all the sensitive or embarrassing details, if you don't want to. Talking with them about your questions, concerns, and privacy needs builds trust and helps them understand how best to support you.



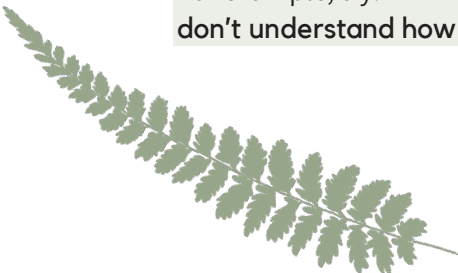
If you feel comfortable, start by sharing what you learned from your provider or what's on your mind. It's normal to feel nervous about bringing up certain topics. Here are a few ways to start the conversation:

- **Pick the right time.** Try talking when you're both calm and not distracted. This could be after a meal or during a walk.
- **Start small.** You don't need to share everything at once. Even a little information builds trust.

You can say: "There's something on my mind, but I'm not sure how to say it. Can I tell you a little bit to start?"

- **Use "I" statements.**

For example, try: "I'm feeling stressed about school," instead of, "You don't understand how stressful school is."

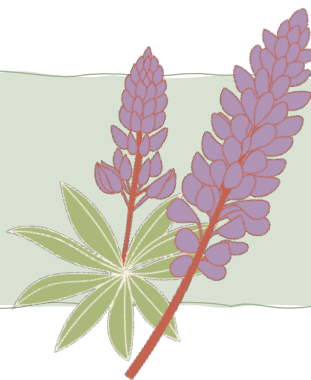


- **Ask for support, not solutions.**

You can say: "I just need someone to listen," or "Can you help me think through my options?"

- **Practice with your provider.** If you're unsure how to start, ask your provider to help you find the right words.
- **Remember:** Talking with your parent or guardian doesn't take away your confidentiality—it's a way to find support with tough issues.

🌟 **Quick tip:** Find more resources and information about your health care rights at [Teen Health Hub WA](#).



DOH 141-276 July 2026: This guide was written by youth-serving medical providers with help from the 2025–26 Youth Advisory Council members. To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127. Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 (Washington Relay) or email doh.information@doh.wa.gov.



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