Medical mistakes are the bane of millions of well-intended healthcare professionals who are working to fool-proof their systems and practices. But according to our research, patients often play an unwitting role in bringing about these medical mistakes by not speaking up to their healthcare practitioners.

Our study identified patients who had recently encountered problems from feeling mistreated by healthcare practitioners to feeling worried their care provider was making a significant mistake. We found that patients often find themselves in a quandary, worrying that their healthcare professional is acting on poor information. But they often feel they have to choose between being respectful and sharing their concerns. Given these two choices, they usually say nothing about their concerns—and their silence puts them at risk for significant personal harm.

Specifically, less than 50 percent of patients spoke up when a caregiver was unclear about diagnosis, treatment options, or next steps. When patients believed the care provider was making a medication error, they were more inclined to speak up—yet more than a third still did not. As a result, one in five of these people have suffered “substantial” health problems.

The main reason people don’t speak up is because they don’t want to cause offense. And yet with a few simple communication skills, they can respectfully speak up and share important information that they alone know about their medical history and current symptoms. By stepping up to these crucial conversations with their healthcare practitioners, patients can avoid preventable medical errors and significant personal harm.

An innovator in corporate training and leadership development, VitalSmarts combines three decades of original research with 50 years of the best social science thinking to help leaders and organizations change human behavior and achieve new levels of performance. VitalSmarts has identified four high-leverage skill sets that, when used in combination, create healthy corporate cultures. These skills are taught in the Company’s award-winning training programs and *New York Times* bestselling books of the same titles: *Crucial Conversations*, *Crucial Accountability*, *Influencer*, and *Change Anything*. VitalSmarts has consulted with more than 300 of the Fortune 500 companies and trained more than one million people worldwide. [www.vitalsmarts.com](http://www.vitalsmarts.com)

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**TIPS for CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR DOCTOR**

- **You are the expert.** Do not defer by assuming the caregiver knows everything. Realize you have important information that your medical professional desperately needs to make informed decisions.

- **Speak up early.** Speaking up before you get upset, worried, or angry will inevitably yield better results. If you are already angry or upset, remind yourself this is probably a harried professional who is doing his or her best under the circumstances. Then open your mouth in a way that helps rather than insults him or her.

- **Show respect.** Before describing your concerns, start by affirming your respect for your doctor’s competence and position.

- **Share the facts.** Caregivers have a hard time with vague statements like, “Are you sure that’s right?” or accusations like, “I don’t like the way you’re talking to me!” Stop and think about what is happening that is making you uncomfortable. Look for the concrete facts that will help the caregiver understand clearly what is bothering you.

- **End with a question.** Show once again you are interested in the professional’s point of view by ending with a question such as “Is this correct?”

**ABOUT THE RESEARCH.** The study collected responses via an online survey of 158 individuals in March of 2005. Margin of error is approximately 3%.

**LEARN NEW SKILLS.** To learn how Crucial Conversations® Training can help you and your doctor make the best decisions for your health, visit [www.vitalsmarts.com](http://www.vitalsmarts.com) or call 1.800.449.5989.