

Reducing frustration with health care is key for those with chronic medical conditions

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Matthew Lee Smith is an associate professor of health promotion and behavior in UGA's College of Public Health. Credit: Peter Frey/UGA

Navigating the U.S. health care system can be frustrating for anyone, but for adults with chronic medical conditions, the frustration can become

overwhelming as they juggle multiple providers, medications and treatments.

But now, a study from the University of Georgia published online in January in Patient Education and Counseling provides insights into how [health care providers](#), in conjunction with the [patients](#) themselves, can reduce the feelings of dissatisfaction and annoyance that result from medical encounters.

The study examined health care-related frustrations of adults with chronic conditions, such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, stroke and depression, which are among the most common and costly of all illnesses.

"Approximately half of adults in the United States have a [chronic condition](#), while one in four adults have multiple chronic diseases, and this number is expected to increase in coming years," said Matthew Lee Smith, lead author of the study and an associate professor of [health promotion](#) and behavior in UGA's College of Public Health.

"With the growth of the aging population and rise of chronic conditions in the U.S., it is important to understand more about the health care-related frustrations experienced by those living with disease," said Smith, who is also a member of UGA's Institute of Gerontology. "Frustrations experienced by patients are really symptoms of larger problems within our health care system."

The researchers analyzed almost 600 responses to a survey administered to Americans aged 44 years and older who self-identified as having one or more chronic conditions. The survey was conducted by the National Council on Aging to gather information about the lives, struggles and needs of people living with chronic conditions.

The study found that 70 percent of patients with chronic conditions reported having at least two of six noted frustrations: feeling tired of describing the same condition over and over; wishing the doctor had more time to speak with them during visits; leaving the provider feeling confused; feeling alone when it comes to managing their health; feeling their doctor doesn't understand what it's like to manage their condition at home; and wishing they had a friend or family member who could go to the doctor with them.

It also identified the factors that contribute to patient frustrations. Those with more frustrations had a lack of knowledge about how to care for their conditions, had physical limitations, visited a physician more frequently and had less help and support from friends or family.

"The health care needs of people with chronic conditions are more complex, but with proper management, health outcomes can be improved and costly hospitalizations can be reduced," Smith said.

"There are opportunities to make the system more productive, which can alleviate patients' frustrations—we need to improve patient-provider communication, but we also need to shift focus to what we can do outside of health care interactions."

While care coordination and patient-provider communication are important in addressing patients' frustration, Smith emphasized that since only a small amount of an individual's life is spent in a [health care](#) setting, patients need to find ways to manage their disease independently.

"There are many evidence-based programs for adults living with chronic conditions that provide knowledge and skills to improve symptom management and promote healthful behaviors," he said. "Health care interactions can't do it alone."

More information: Matthew Lee Smith et al. Factors associated with healthcare-related frustrations among adults with chronic conditions, *Patient Education and Counseling* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.pec.2016.12.033](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2016.12.033)

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