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## Should you give your Social Security number to your doctor?

Social Security Numbers (SSN) were never intended to be used as identifiers. However, over the years, these unique ID numbers have become just that; a way for various entities to identify an individual. However, an article in the *Huffington Post* reports that cyber security experts list the Social Security number as the “single most valuable piece of information in terms of being able to steal your identity.” ([https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/doctor-social-security-number-medical\\_us\\_5a7222e7e4b05253b2753682](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/doctor-social-security-number-medical_us_5a7222e7e4b05253b2753682)).

The article addresses specifically the question as to whether you need to give your doctor your SSN. We are so used to giving out this number that we don't even think twice. Many of us have the number memorized since it is requested so often. However, unless you have Medicare or Medicaid as your insurance, your health care provider does not need, nor are they entitled to your Social Security Number. In fact, the American Medical Association (AMA) warns against you doing so. Most of the time, it is just easier for the healthcare provider to ask everyone for their SSN because it is expedient and it helps to track you down if you do not pay your bill. However, the more often you provide your Social Security Number to others, the more that you risk identity theft.

In 2017, per the article, there were 830 data breaches involving Social Security Numbers, which was more than half of the total reported number of breaches. Many of these breaches occurred in the healthcare industry. TrendMicro, an information security company, calls the healthcare sector a “preferred target” for cyber criminals. The Department of Health and Human Services is aware that health care related records are being stolen at record numbers; moreover, about half of all healthcare providers do not believe that they can detect the loss or theft of patient data. Furthermore, Medicare cards have for many years listed the Social Security number of the beneficiary in total. This is finally changing but the SSN number of numerous beneficiaries is recorded in a less than secure fashion.

Not everyone has a legal right to your Social Security number. Those who do include, but are not limited to, employers, the IRS and state and local taxing authorities, Medicare and the Social Security Administration, when applying for a hunting or fishing license, and those with whom you have financial transactions such as banks, credit card companies, mortgage brokers, etc. Be very wary of those who request the last four digits of your SSN, which has become a common practice in many situations. Even that much information can be a treasure trove for criminals.

It is suggested that if someone asks for your SSN, outside of situations where it is required by law or regulation that you push back. Using a driver's license or other form of ID is much safer since criminals cannot use that information to steal your identity as easily. It is prohibited by law for any State to list your SSN on your driver's license. This includes responding to your doctor's office request (unless you are Medicare beneficiary). If your physician's office states that they need this information, refer them to the AMA website. The office personnel's convenience should not be the determining factor as to whether you reveal your Social Security Number.