



Getting the Most From Your Doctor Visit

For many people, a visit to the doctor's office can be stressful and even a little scary. But by taking an active role in your health care, you can help make sure that your next doctor visit is a success.



Be ready

Your symptoms, lifestyle, and history will play an important role in your diagnosis. So, before you even set foot inside the waiting room, gather enough information to give your doctor a full picture of your situation. Don't rely on memory alone. Instead, make written lists:

- List any current or previous medical conditions you have had and any treatments or surgeries you have undergone, including dates. It helps to have copies of your medical records from other physicians on hand as well, especially if you are a new patient.
- Make a list of the medications you currently take, including prescription and over-the-counter drugs, herbal supplements, vitamins, and minerals. Note each medication's dosage, how often you take it, for how long you have taken it, and most important, why you take it. If you are unsure, bring the medication bottles with you.
- Write down any symptoms you are having. Describe how often you have them, when they first appeared, and how strong they are. Think of the usual questions your doctor might ask, such as "What brought you in today?" and "What kind of pain are you experiencing?" Keeping a daily journal of your symptoms can serve as a helpful reminder of exactly what you have experienced.
- Write down any questions or concerns you want to discuss with your doctor. If you have a lot of questions, focus on the two or three that are most important to you, discuss these in detail with your doctor, and schedule additional appointments to talk about the others.
- If possible, find out in advance how

much time you will have with your doctor. Knowing your time limit can help you stay focused as you plan for the appointment.

Be heard

Communicating with your doctor is the key to a successful visit. You and your doctor should agree on exactly what will be done during each step of your care, so make it a point to actively listen and to let your doctor know what you think.

- Speak up if you have questions or concerns, and if you don't understand something, ask again until you do. Your health is too important to worry about being embarrassed if you don't understand something your doctor tells you.
- Take notes to help you remember what you talked about during your visit. Jotting down information about treatment options or medications will help you understand and manage your condition. If your doctor refers you to a specialist, ask for several specific questions to ask the specialist, and write these down as well.
- If your doctor prescribes a new medicine, ask what the medicine is supposed to achieve.
- Ask your doctor for more information about your condition. Ask him or her to recommend Web sites, articles, and other sources where you can learn more. The more you know about your diagnosis, the better you can manage it.
- It may help to have a trusted family member or friend by your side during your doctor visit, especially if you're feeling overwhelmed or

stressed. This person can ask questions that you may not think of while you are under stress. He or she can speak up for you if you cannot do so yourself and later can help you remember the answers to questions you asked.

Be sure to follow up

Your care doesn't end when the appointment is over.

- Before leaving, find out the best way to contact your doctor in case you have questions about your care or any prescriptions.
- After the visit, educate yourself about your diagnosis, any medical tests you are undergoing, and your treatment plan. Review your notes and any information the doctor gave you along with any other sources he or she suggested.
- Talk with people you trust who have experienced the same treatments or procedures that you will undergo. They can help you prepare for the days and weeks ahead and can tell you what to expect and what worked best for them as they recovered.
- Finally, don't be afraid to seek a second opinion. If you are unsure about the nature of your illness and the best treatment, consult one or two other specialists. The more information you have about the options available to you, the more confident you will be in the decisions made. ●

Source: *Speak Up for Healthcare Safety*, The Joint Commission

For more information, talk to your physician, or:

- call askMDAnderson at 1-877-632-6789
- visit www.mdanderson.org.

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