

Making Doctor Visits Productive

Going to the doctor's office is rarely fun, but a little preparation can go a long way toward making the experience less stressful. Taking the time to choose the right doctor and preparing for each office visit will help you get the best quality care in a comfortable setting.

A good relationship with your doctor is an essential part of a good health-care plan. The keys to building a successful relationship are preparation and communication. Use the following suggestions to ensure that you get the most out of your next doctor visit.

Choosing a Doctor

The first step is to choose a doctor, if you do not already have a primary physician. When choosing a doctor, make sure to evaluate the following:

- **Qualifications.** A board certified doctor has undergone additional training after medical school and specializes in a particular field of medicine.
- **Hospital affiliation.** If you have a hospital preference, you should make sure that the doctor has privileges at that hospital. If something happens to you that requires a hospital stay, having a friendly face may help to ease your concerns.
- **Insurance.** If you have a managed care plan, you will want to make sure that the doctor is a part of the plan's network. Some plans will not permit you to see a doctor that is not in the network while others will charge you a higher rate.

You may want to get referrals from friends, family members or neighbors. Once you have a list of possible doctors, call the office and speak with the receptionist. He or she can help you gather the following information:

- **Office procedures.** The office staff can tell you about basic office procedures, such as office hours, cancellation policies and average wait time.
- **Backup care procedures.** If your primary physician is sick, you will need to know if there are other doctors on staff that can see you if you are sick.
- **Office location.** If you are unsure of the exact location of the office, the office staff can help you with directions.

It is a good idea to schedule an appointment with the doctor before you need care so that you can meet the doctor and get a feel for his or her bedside manner. Another option is to schedule a yearly physical with the doctor and ask the office staff for an extended appointment period. This meeting will give you the opportunity to ask additional questions about office practices and treatment style. If you feel comfortable

with the doctor after this meeting, then you may feel more at ease when you actually need care. Be careful if you do make this type of appointment, as you will probably be charged for the doctor's time and your insurance may not cover this fee.

Preparing for the Visit

When planning to make your next trip to the doctor, a little preparation goes a long way. Use the following tips to make the most of the time that you have with your doctor.

Before the first visit:

- **Transfer medical records.** Make sure that your doctor has your complete medical file. You can contact your previous doctors to request that your record be transferred to the your new doctor's office.
- **Bring your insurance card.** You will need to show your new doctor proof of insurance so that the office staff can send your claims to the insurance company. Make sure that the card lists the claims address or bring the address to the appointment.
- **Arrive early.** Most doctors require new patients to fill out paperwork during the first visit. Plan to arrive a little early so that you have time to fill out any forms without eating into your appointment time. You should also prepare your medical history before this visit, since some of the forms will have areas for you to record past illnesses, allergies, surgeries and other historical information.

Before your next visit:

- **Write down questions.** If you have any questions or concerns that you want to address with your doctor, it may help to write them down. This way you will not forget to bring up any issues with your doctor. If topics are sensitive, you can write the questions down and give your doctor the list to read.
- **Record any symptoms.** If you have a chronic illness or are noticing other changes in your body, make a log of symptoms. Be sure to include a description of the symptom along with the frequency and duration of the symptom. You may also want to record any activities or foods that may be contributing to the symptom.
- **Do your research.** Take the time to educate yourself about your condition so that you can ask more informed questions. If you suspect that you may have an illness, read up on that illness. You may come up with possible explanations or treatment options that you can discuss with your doctor.
- **Make a list of medications.** This is especially important if you see different doctors for different conditions. Some medications may have adverse effects when combined, and some combinations can even be life threatening. You should also note any supplements that you are currently taking.
- **Be specific.** When making the appointment, be specific about the reason for your visit. The office staff will be better able to assist you if you give them enough information.

During the Visit

Since you will have a limited amount of time to spend with your doctor, use the following tips to make sure you get the most benefit:

- **Ask questions.** If you do not understand a diagnosis or treatment, ask your doctor for clarification. Ask for reading materials if you feel that you need extra information. Ask the doctor to draw you a picture if you need more explanation. Be assertive- it is your health that is on the line.

- **Be honest.** Answer your doctor's questions openly and honestly, even if the topic is sensitive or if you feel that it is unnecessary. Err to the side of giving more information. The more information that you provide to your doctor, the more your doctor will be able to help you.
- **Make sure you understand all instructions.** If your doctor sends you home with a treatment plan or medication, make sure you fully understand his or her instructions. Ask for clarification if any parts of the procedure seem confusing.
- **Take notes or bring a friend.** Some people find it helpful to take notes during an appointment or to have a friend or family member present. This will ensure that you understand all of the important information.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

When your doctor gives you a diagnosis, you may want to ask the following questions:

- What caused or contributed to this diagnosis?
- Are there any lifestyle changes that can help with this illness?
- What medications are available and what are the possible side effects?
- Are there any alternate treatments?
- Do you mind if I get a second opinion?

When preparing for surgery, you may want to ask the following questions:

- Are there any other treatments that may work for this condition?
- Will I be under general anesthesia?
- What is my expected recovery time?
- What are the risks of this treatment?
- What is your experience with this procedure?
- Where will the procedure be performed?
- Do you mind if I get a second opinion?

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