

Communicating with Your Doctor

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You are in a health partnership with your doctor, so you need to be an active participant in your care. Here are a few tips for communicating with your physician:

- Be organized before arriving at the doctor's office. Come prepared with information about your symptoms, how long you have had the symptoms, what -- if anything -- you have done to treat them at home. Also, be prepared to discuss your lifestyle, habits, etc.
- Bring a list of medications you take including dosage and frequency (or the actual medication bottles).
- Also before your visit, prepare a list of questions you may have about your symptoms or condition. Check off the questions as they are answered so you know you have covered everything.
- Be prepared to talk about your family's medical history, as well as your own, including any major medical events. Bring a list of your immunizations and medical history, if possible.
- Make sure you provide your doctor with complete information about your condition -- don't hold back. This may mean relating some very personal information, but it is in your best interest to help the doctor determine the best course of treatment.
- Take notes during your visit and mark items that you want to follow-up on before you finish your visit.
- Ask plenty of questions and make sure you understand the answers. Ask the doctor to explain the answer in a way that you can understand.
- Explore all treatment possibilities together to help you come up with an educated decision about your treatment plan.
- Before your appointment is over, briefly repeat back to your doctor what was said to make sure you have understood and your notes are accurate.
- Follow through completely with the agreed-upon treatment. If it is not working, inform your doctor as soon as possible.
- Find out the best way your doctor would like for you to follow up, either phone calls, e-mail or another office visit.
- After you leave and you have forgotten to ask your doctor something, don't be afraid to contact your doctor's office and get your question answered.
- Be assertive, but not aggressive, to make sure the doctor is meeting your needs.
- Before and after your appointment, feel comfortable doing some independent research on your own about your condition.

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- **Make a list of your concerns.** Start a few days in advance, if possible, to track symptoms or other concerns. Be thorough and honest; the details are important. Keeping the list to one page will help the doctor stay engaged. Mention your most important concerns first. Consider giving the doctor a copy of your list so she can follow along. This will help make the best use of the limited time you have for your appointment.
- **Speak up.** Doctors tend to prioritize diagnostic information and core concerns early in the office visit. Make sure you make your key concerns known at the onset of the visit to help prevent the doctor from jumping to conclusions about treatments or dismissing issues you believe are important.
- **Listen.** It is so easy to get rattled at a doctor's visit that it sometimes feels like the appointment is over in a blink of an eye and all you walk out with is the blurred memory of a meeting and a prescription. Take some deep breaths and focus on what the doctor is saying. Bring a tape recorder and ask the doctor if she wouldn't mind your recording the visit to help you better remember the information you discuss.
- **Ask questions.** Don't hesitate to ask when words the doctor is using are unfamiliar or his instructions are not clear to you. Question the assumptions behind proposed treatments that do not seem viable in your situation. And above all, you deserve to know what the cost to you may be for a proposed treatment. Doctors' recommendations are only as valuable as your interest and ability to put them into practice.
- **Don't minimize the symptoms or situation.** Remarks like "it's just a little cough" or "my mother being up all night really isn't a problem," might lead your doctor to the same conclusion. If your real fear is that your sister's lung cancer started with a similar cough, let the doctor know. If mom's being up all night is preventing you from getting any sleep, say so. A few reassuring words, an appropriate test or as-needed sleeping medication can put your mind at ease.
- **Share your knowledge.** The doctor knows medical care and you know family care. Share information with the doctor about valuable community resources that have helped you. The doctor and their staff appreciate patient recommendations. They, in turn, can use this information to help other caregivers and patients.

You know yourself better than anyone else in the world, so pay attention to your body and what it is telling you, then communicate this to the doctor. Remember that the doctor only sees you when you are sick or not feeling well, he/she does not know what you are like normally. Also, when the doctor sees you for 15 or 20 minutes, he/she is only seeing a snapshot photo of you, whereas you see the whole movie!

Washington Advocates for Patient Safety