

Tips on What to Do During Your Health Care Appointment

Here are some ideas that can help you communicate better with your health care team. Better communication can mean better health.

1. Come to your appointment prepared. Bring and share a list of the questions you want to ask and medications you take.

Before you leave for your appointment, take a moment to review what you want to say during the visit and the questions you want to ask. Review these things in your mind, or better yet, write them down in a list and take it with you to your visit.

- Taking a list to your visit makes it easy for you to tell the nurses, doctors and other health professionals what they need to know about your symptoms, medications, and other health issues. Bring extra copies of your lists.
- Giving your health care providers a written list of questions helps make sure they can give you the answers you need, even if you are feeling rushed or unsure of what you are asking.
- Sometimes your doctor may ask you to bring certain information, like a record of what you've eaten over the past week. But even if you're not asked to bring anything in writing, it's still a good idea to do it. That way, you'll be prepared to talk about what's most important to you.

2. Ask questions, and if you don't understand the answers, ask again.

Asking questions is one of the best ways to help make sure you are getting quality care. Below are some suggestions about asking questions during your visit.

- Ask the questions on your list.
 - Go over the written list of questions you brought with you to the visit to make sure you don't miss any of them.
 - Ask your most important questions first.
- Speak up whenever you are confused or have concerns about what is said.
 - If a nurse, doctor or other health professional says something that's unclear or confusing, let them know right away. If you have to, don't hesitate to interrupt by saying: "Excuse me, I didn't understand what you just said. Would you please tell me again?"
 - If you aren't happy with the recommended treatment or you have other concerns, you need to let the doctor know. You can say you have a concern. You can ask if there might be another treatment to consider and if the doctor has brochures or other resources to share with you about your options.
- If you don't understand an answer, ask again. If the nurse or doctor answers your question and you still don't understand, you need to say so.
 - Don't be embarrassed to ask a question twice. Remember, it's your body and you need to be sure you understand.
 - You can say: "I'm sorry but I still don't understand. Would you try saying that again in a different way?"

- Ask questions about medications and other treatments.
 - Ask why you need to take the medicine and what it is supposed to do.
 - Be sure you understand exactly how to take the medicine (when, how much, and for how long).
 - For safety, ask about possible side effects the medicine might cause. Ask whether there are any symptoms or problems you should be watching for and what to do if you notice them.
- If any questions come up after you leave the office, call back and ask.
- For help in asking questions, use resources like the Questions Are the Answer website at www.ahrq.gov/questions.

3. To double check you understand, repeat what you've heard using your own words.

It's important to be sure you understand what is said about your health and what you need to do. You might be given a lot of new information during your visit and there may be unfamiliar technical terms. It's hard to absorb new information in a short period of time.

- Whether you are feeling confused or not, it's wise to make a habit of checking on how well you understand what is said during your medical visit.
- After your doctor or nurse tells you something, repeat the main points back in your own words.
- If you have misunderstood something, the doctor or nurse will know right away, and they can give you more explanation.
- It's always better to double check than to assume you understood and find out later you were wrong.

4. Take notes to help remember what was said and what you need to do.

Taking notes during your visit is a good way to make sure you remember what the doctor or other health professional said by the time you get home. Notes are good reminders about the instructions you need to follow and the symptoms you need to watch for.

If you bring a friend or family member with you to your appointment, you can ask them to take notes for you. When your visit is over, you can talk with them about what was said and what you need to do.

If during your visit, you are given a brochure or referred to another resource, go over it carefully when you get home. If any questions come up when you read it, call your health professional's office.

While we want a doctor to just take care of us, we can't afford to be passive when it comes to our health care. Just like you count on your doctor to be ready and trained to see you and meet your needs, your doctor is counting on you.

Your doctor and your whole health care team need you to be prepared for every health care appointment and speak up both during and after your visit. Being prepared and taking an active role will benefit your health and help you get the most out of your visits.