

Update: Physician Communications



Building a Healthy Partnership with Your Physician

You and your physician are focused on the same thing – your health. But with the average physician visit lasting only 15-17 minutes, confusing medical terminology, and the pressure and confusion of packing an array of questions and explanations into one face-to-face meeting, it's no wonder that seniors often struggle with doctor-patient communications.

How well you and your doctor communicate is an important part of getting good health care. As you age, develop more conditions, and require more tests, treatments, and prescriptions, good communication becomes critical in avoiding medical complications and maintaining or improving health. Building a good relationship with your doctor and engaging in two-way communication will allow you to share information, get answers, and work together to make the best possible health care decisions.

Preparing for the visit

As a patient, you are ultimately responsible for providing information to your doctor and obtaining answers to any questions you have. Spending a little time before the appointment making notes about your symptoms, concerns, or questions can help you maximize the brief time you have with your doctor.

Make a list of your concerns so you don't forget to tell the doctor anything. List symptoms and any recent changes in your health, medications, habits, or lifestyle. Consider making a copy of this information to give to the doctor to make better use of the limited time you have at the appointment.

Make a list of your questions. Practice them if you need to so that you are confident when talking with your doctor.

Make a list of all medications – prescriptions, over-the-counter, supplements, and vitamins – that you are taking and in what doses, or bring the medicines with you.

Take a pad and paper or a tape recorder to capture information the physician shares. Or, if you want or need to, arrange for someone to come with you to your appointment.

Take any devices that you need, such as eyeglasses, a magnifying glass, or hearing aids. Arrive early to your appointment to avoid any added stress.

Bring your insurance information, especially if you are a new patient.

Talking with your physician

You may not have much time to talk with your physician about your concerns, but you should still feel comfortable asking questions and expecting answers. You are a partner in your health care, so there is no need to feel shy or be intimidated by your doctor. Be straightforward, honest, and informative, or bring someone with you who can be. Ask all the questions you need, and don't leave until you are satisfied that you have the information you need.

- Mention your most important concerns first so that you and your doctor can focus on them.
- Don't downplay your symptoms or health concerns. If your physician doesn't have all the information, he or she cannot make an informed diagnosis.
- Don't hesitate to discuss sensitive topics such as sexual problems or memory loss. Your doctor is used to talking about these matters, and they can be important clues to other health issues.
- Be sure to listen as well as talk. Taking notes during your visit (or recording it) to help you remember what you and your doctor talk about. Write down or record what the doctor says about your condition and the prescribed treatment.
- Know your medical history (or bring your personal record) and be able to discuss it. Share your list of medications. If you are seeing a new physician, you might have your medical records transferred before your appointment.
- Share information about care you are receiving from any other health care providers – doctors, chiropractors, etc.

About My Health Care Manager

My Health Care Manager helps older adults and their families understand and navigate the health issues and complex decisions associated with aging. For more information, contact My Health Care Manager, 8520 Allison Pointe Blvd., Suite 230, Indianapolis, IN 46250, 317-598-8921 or 800-499-8020 or visit us on the Web at www.MyHealthCareManager.com.

A Dialogue: Difficult Decisions

If you are confused or uncomfortable, say so. Don't hesitate to ask the doctor to speak slowly, put explanations in layman's terms, or explain something you don't understand in more detail. It may be helpful to repeat back to your doctor what he or she says using your own words and ask if you are correct.

- Review the information you are given with the doctor or staff to be sure all of your questions have been answered and that you understand what you need to do, especially regarding medications.
- When you can, share your own knowledge about lifestyle changes or community resources that have helped you with a condition. Remember – communication goes both ways, and your information may help your doctor help another patient.

Asking questions is key to good communication with your doctor. If you don't ask questions, your doctor may think you do not need or want more information. Asking questions helps your doctor know what is important to you or when something is unclear.

Asking Questions Effectively

You will want to ask your doctor questions about your diagnosis, tests, and prescriptions. Make sure you understand the information, or ask questions until you do.

Questions to ask about a diagnosis:

- What may have caused this condition?
- What course could this condition take? Can it be cured? What is the long-term prognosis?
- Are there other symptoms that could develop?
- How is this condition treated or managed?
- Are there alternative treatments?
- What are the benefits or risks of these treatments?
- Do you have any patient education materials – pamphlets, websites, videos, books?

Questions to ask about ongoing care:

- When do I need to see you again?
- Do I need to see a specialist?
- What should I do if my symptoms worsen?

Questions to ask about ongoing care:

Why is this test being done?
What does the test involve?
How safe is this test?
Is any preparation, such as fasting, necessary?
Are there any risks or side effects?
What are the options or implications if I don't have this test?

See "Asking Questions Effectively" for guidelines on what to ask about your diagnosis, tests, prescriptions, or follow-up care.

After the office visit

Communication with your physician does not end once you leave the office.

- If your symptoms worsen unexpectedly or if a prescribed treatment does not work or causes worrisome side effects, contact your doctor.
- If your doctor does not contact you when expected with lab or test results, contact the office.
- It is your responsibility to obtain your medications, follow the prescribing instructions, and report any problems or unexpected side effects to your doctor.

By establishing open, two-way communication, you and your doctor can work together for the benefit of your health.

When will you have test results and when can I expect to receive them?

Does my insurance cover the test?

Questions to ask about medications:

What is the name of the medicine and how is it spelled?
Why am I taking this and how will it help me?
When should I start taking it and for how long?
What is the correct dose and when do I take it? (e.g. number of doses per day)
How do I take it? (e.g. before/after meals, with a full glass of water)
What should I do if I miss a dose?
Are there foods, drugs, alcohol, or activities I should avoid while taking it?
Is there a generic version available?
Will I need prescription refills?
Are there common side effects and what should I do if I have them?

And perhaps most importantly ...

Is there any risk of interaction with other medicines I am taking? Be sure to tell your doctor about all prescription and over-the-counter medicines and supplements.

Resources and information on talking with your doctor

Family Caregiver Alliance

http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=678

National Institute on Aging

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/talkingwithyourdoctor/toc.html>

AARP -- "How to Talk to Your Doctor"

http://www.aarp.org/health/staying_healthy/prevention/a2003-03-13-talkdr.html

MedicineNet.com -- download "How to Help Your Doctor: Easy Steps to Improve Your Medical Care"

<http://www.medicinenet.com/pdf/howtohelpyourdoctor.pdf>

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

<http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/quicktips/doctalk.htm>