

Making the Most of Your Medical Visit

Preparing for Your Medical Visit

One of the best ways to show your health care provider that you want to be an active and informed participant in your health care is to take with you to your appointment some basic information about your medical situation along with a list of three or four questions that you would like answered. Be sure to let your provider know at the beginning of the visit that you have this information, as well as several questions you want to cover. This will show that you have given thought to the medical issues of greatest concern to you and that you want to make good use of your time together. It is a good idea to write your questions on a card or sheet of paper in case your provider's answer to one of your questions shifts your attention away from your other concerns.

Below are a number of questions that can help you organize this information and prepare for your appointment.

- *What is your "number one" concern?* What problem or problems do you want addressed? For example, is your primary objective to have your condition diagnosed and treated as aggressively as possible, or do you want to find a treatment that minimizes pain and allows you to continue with activities you enjoy? Sometimes physicians and other providers are so focused on identifying and treating the underlying disease that they do not pay enough attention to aspects of the disease or treatments that are of greatest concern to patients.
- *What symptoms are you experiencing?* Be as specific as possible. When did they begin? If they are not constant, then at what times or in what situations do they occur? What makes them improve or become worse? Have you ever had these symptoms before? If so, how long ago and how were they treated? How is this illness affecting your day-to-day life?
- *What is your understanding of the problem?* Perhaps you have discussed your problem with a friend or looked for information on the Internet. If you have some ideas about what you are experiencing or what has caused the problem, share these with your provider.
- *What remedies have you already tried?* Have you taken any over-the-counter medications? Have you changed your diet or any of your habits in an attempt to address the problem? If so, did your efforts help?
- *Are you being treated for any other problems by another health care professional?* If so, who are you seeing and for what problems?
- *What medications, including nonprescription medications and nutritional supplements, are you currently taking?* Often the best way to provide this information is for you to carry all your medications with you to your appointment.
- *Have there been any significant changes in your life since your last appointment* (e.g., illness or death of a loved one, difficulties in relationships with family or friends, new living arrangements, change in finances, new responsibilities at work, change in your ability to handle household matters)?

- *How have you been feeling emotionally lately?* Have you felt anxious or depressed about your health or anything else going on in your life?
- *Are there any potential obstacles to the treatment or additional diagnostic tests that might be recommended* (e.g., financial limitations, family or work responsibilities)?
- *Have you completed any advance directives* (e.g., living will, health care agent, or durable power of attorney for health care)? If so, be sure to take copies with you and ask your provider to add them to your chart. If not, then consider discussing these with your provider.

One more step you should consider as you prepare for your medical visit is to ask a family member or friend to go with you. If you think it might be difficult for you to present all the information that needs to be presented or to ask important questions or to remember what is recommended, then ask someone to go with you to your appointment.

Meeting with Your Provider

Remember to take your basic medical information and your questions with you, along with paper and pen to record the information and recommendations your provider will be giving you. Also, carry all your medications, both prescription and nonprescription, or at least a detailed list of these medications. If you are having someone go with you, be sure to let them know exactly what role you want him or her to play during your visit.

If a nurse or medical assistant takes your blood pressure before you see your provider, ask for the results and record these. Later, during your examination, ask your provider what he or she thinks about your blood pressure.

When your provider arrives and begins questioning you, start by explaining your number one reason for the visit, being as specific as you can about your symptoms, concerns, and hopes. Also be sure to mention that you have several questions you need to ask before you leave.

When sharing information about your symptoms and what you believe they may indicate, be as specific, complete, and organized as possible. Exactly what are you experiencing now and how does that differ from what you normally experience? If some symptoms suggest to you a certain diagnosis, perhaps based on what someone else told you or what you found on the Internet or in a medical book, then report those symptoms and ask if they might be an indication of a particular condition. This will enable your provider to ask key questions and determine if that is the correct diagnosis.

If you believe that your medical problem might be related to stress you are experiencing or something you have done, share this with your provider. If you are concerned that this information would prove embarrassing if family members or friends were to learn about it, ask your provider exactly how he or she handles information that you want to be kept in confidence. Part of a federal law, the Privacy Rule of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), strictly limits what information health care professionals can share with or tell others—even a spouse—without a patient's permission.

If your provider does not ask if you are seeing any other health professionals or receiving treatment for other problems, go ahead and volunteer this information. Be sure to include treatments that may not be strictly medical (e.g., acupuncture, nutritional and herbal supplements, chiropractic care, homeopathy). Also, let your provider know about the medications, prescription and nonprescription, that you are taking.

As your provider conducts a physical examination, do not be reluctant to ask if he or she has found anything of importance. Did your heart sound okay? What about your lungs? If he or she seems to spend more time on one part of the examination, ask why. And this would be a good time to ask about your blood pressure.

Following the physical examination and your report of your symptoms, concerns, medications, and other medical problems for which you are being treated, your provider may be able to give you a diagnosis. Your diagnosis should be given in terms that you can understand. If you do not understand the terms being used, do not hesitate to speak up and ask for clarification. In fact, even if you are relatively confident that you understand the diagnosis, it is a good idea to repeat it and to put into your own words your understanding of the condition. We recommend that you write down the diagnosis and explanation and then ask your provider to read over what you have written to be sure that it is correct.

If for any reason you do not believe the diagnosis you have been given is correct or that the treatment recommended for you will be effective, voice your doubts to your provider and explain why you disagree. It is far better to politely and respectfully express your doubts during the appointment than to keep your thoughts to yourself and then, once you leave your appointment, disregard your provider's opinion and recommendations.

It is usually a good idea to ask what has caused your condition or what factors have contributed to its development. For many chronic conditions, there is more than one contributing factor, so it may be difficult for your provider to give a definitive answer to this question, but he or she should be able to provide you with a general explanation. Here again, we recommend that you repeat and then write down this information.

Once the diagnosis has been determined and contributing factors discussed, your provider will offer treatment recommendations. Often this will include a prescription for one or more medications. It is important that you understand exactly what is being prescribed and why it is being prescribed. Estimates are that as many as 50 percent or more of patients do not take their medications appropriately. Frequently, this is because of a breakdown in communication between provider and patient.

If your provider does not volunteer enough information about the medication, you need to ask a number of questions. Exactly what are the expected benefits of the medication? How long will it take for you to notice the benefits? How should it be taken? Is this medication likely to interfere with any of your other medications? Is this a medication that will need to be taken only for a limited period of time, or is it likely that you will need to remain on it indefinitely? Is it possible that you will experience some side effects? If so, what should you do? Be sure to write down the answers to these questions and review your notes with your provider before you leave.

If there is any reason why you might not be able to take the medication you have been prescribed, do not hesitate to mention this to your provider. Doctors and other health providers understand and appreciate the fact that the latest and best medication for a particular medical condition is of no value if it is not taken as prescribed. If the cost of the medication is the obstacle, explain this to your provider. Often a less expensive alternative that has similar benefits can be prescribed. If your work schedule or other aspects of your life would make it difficult for you to take the medication at the times prescribed, ask if there is a similar medication that would be a better fit with your daily routine.

It is possible your provider will determine that what are generally referred to as lifestyle factors are contributing to your condition and need to be modified. This recommendation often presents at least two challenges for patients. First, many patients do not think of a change in physical activity or diet as a medical treatment. To them, this type of recommendation does not seem to be as important as a recommendation to take a prescribed medication. Therefore, it is important that you have a clear understanding of the connection between these lifestyle factors and your condition. How will a change in your behavior—what you eat or your level of physical activity—affect your medical condition? What will happen if you do not make the recommended changes?

Second, even when patients understand the connection between certain lifestyle factors and their condition, it can be difficult to modify habits that are deeply ingrained and often highly pleasurable. Patients need to recognize this and ask for help implementing and maintaining the recommended changes. For some problems (e.g., smoking), your provider may be able to prescribe medication that will help. If the problem with the recommended modification (e.g., adopting a low-fat diet) is that family members are unlikely to cooperate and support your efforts to change, ask if your provider would be willing to meet with them to explain the importance of these recommendations. If you believe it would be easier for you to make the recommended changes if you could be around others who are working toward a similar goal, ask if there are any community groups or programs that are focused on the same issue (e.g., weight reduction).

Once you are clear about the diagnosis, contributing factors, and treatment recommendations (remember to ask questions if you are unclear about any of these matters), share with your provider your reaction to this information. Do you feel better now that you know the diagnosis and how your condition will be treated? Are you confident that you will be able to follow the recommendations? How has this information affected you emotionally? Has any of what you heard frightened you or discouraged you? Are you worried that your illness or the treatments are going to limit your ability to work or continue with other activities you value and enjoy? If you find that you are pessimistic about your ability to carry out the treatment recommendations or feel overwhelmed emotionally by what you have heard, ask your provider for suggestions about a support group or a mental health professional.

For certain illnesses, you may want to address other issues during a visit with your provider. If you believe that your illness is likely to progress (e.g., Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis), even with the recommended treatment, you may want to ask your provider about the long-term course of your illness and what this may mean with respect to your living arrangements. Would it be advisable for you to make some modifications in your house or apartment (e.g., grab rails, ramps)? Should you or family members begin looking for new

living arrangements (e.g., an assisted living facility, a continuing care retirement community)? Will you need to consider a hospice program at some point? You also may want to get advice about what you should consider as you prepare or update advance directives.

As your visit draws to an end, be sure that you have asked all of your questions and that you understand your provider's answers. You should have a clear understanding of your diagnosis, likely contributing factors, and treatment recommendations. If you feel it would be helpful to learn more about your illness or treatment, ask if there are printed materials or a reliable book or website you could read for more information. Finally, be sure that you know when you are to return for a subsequent appointment or when and where you need to go for additional tests.

Follow-Up

The visit with your provider is certainly an essential part of good medical care. However, for most chronic conditions, what takes place at home is just as important as what takes place when meeting with your doctor or other health professionals. In fact, most of the recommended care will take place at home. For example, the medications prescribed by your provider will be of little benefit if they are not taken correctly, and sound advice about lifestyle modifications is of no value if it is not followed. Therefore, it is important for you to take the steps needed to implement treatment recommendations and to do so as soon as you can after visiting your provider.

It is not uncommon for questions about your illness and/or the treatment recommendations to arise after you have left your provider's office. You may find that the medication you were prescribed does not seem to be having the beneficial effects you were expecting or that it is producing some unpleasant side effects. Or perhaps you are no longer experiencing the symptoms that prompted your medical visit and thus are not certain that you need to continue taking your medication. Any questions about whether or not to continue taking a prescribed medication should be made in consultation with your provider. You should, at a minimum, call your provider's office and express your concerns. If you have discovered that the medication you have been prescribed is too expensive or not on the list of medications covered by your insurance policy, you may want to ask your pharmacist about alternatives and ask that he or she contact your provider to see if the prescription can be changed.

Sometimes an illness is unusual or rare and getting the opinion of another physician or specialist is appropriate. You may not necessarily understand or know when this is the case, but asking your provider whether or not a consultation with another specialist is worthwhile is always a reasonable thing to do. When exceptionally rare or life-threatening conditions are diagnosed, or if a major operation is recommended, you may be comforted by getting a second opinion concerning the recommended course of treatment. Often, it is advisable to turn to a regional or national academic medical center in these cases, and most are set up to handle these types of consultations and referrals. To prepare for such a visit, you should gather and send all appropriate medical records to the expert being consulted so that she or he is prepared to meet with you knowing as much information as possible about your condition and the concerns you want addressed (e.g., recommendations regarding treatment, need for further testing, consideration of other approaches to diagnosis and treatment).

If blood work or other tests were conducted during or shortly after your medical visit, take the initiative to check back with your provider's office (or the patient portal if your provider is using an electronic health record) to get the results and to see if you need to return for another appointment or make any changes in your treatment. Given the complexity of modern medicine, test results can be available within hours (e.g., routine blood work) or take days or even weeks for final results to be released. Particularly for radiology (e.g., X-rays, mammograms, MRIs) or pathology (e.g., skin biopsies), test results and receipt of reports can be delayed. Therefore, it is important for you to track and ensure that your provider receives the final report and that any critical information is shared with you.

Remember, good communication between patients and providers is at the heart of good medical care, and you can do your part by following these three basic recommendations:

- Be prepared for your visit with your provider. Organize key information about your medical situation and prepare several questions you would like answered.
- Be active during your appointment. Ask questions and do not hesitate to request clarification if you do not understand your provider's answers.
- Follow through on your provider's recommendations. If there is a reason you cannot, get back in touch with your provider to explore other alternatives.

