

Tips for your next doctor's visit

What a patient needs to know to obtain the best care

Going to the doctor today is not the same as it used to be. Doctors are operating on tighter-than-ever schedules. They just don't have as much time to spend with each patient as in years past. Dr. James Given, Southwestern physician, says that's why it is important to make the best use of the time you do have to meet with your doctor. According to Dr. Given, "As a patient, you want to be as efficient as you can because, if not, you are going to ask medical professionals to spend their time doing things that are going to take away from your care. You want to be prepared so that you will have time to talk about your problems and ask questions." Dr. Given advises patients to follow these guidelines in visiting the doctor.

Preparing for a doctor's visit

Before your visit, determine the main problem. Talk to your doctor about no more than two problems during the visit. If you present more problems, the doctor will not have enough time to deal with them all thoroughly.

Be prepared to complete a health history and other paperwork. If you are visiting a doctor for the first time, you will be asked to complete a health history. Before your appointment, be sure to make a list of past health issues, treatments, dates, physicians, etc. You may be questioned about health problems that run in your family. You will also want to bring along insurance information, emergency contact information, etc. Even if you are a returning patient, you might have paperwork to complete.

Make a list of your medications. Be sure to make a list of your medications, how you take them, and why you take them. If you do not know all of this information, call the prescribing physicians and ask. When you take the time to complete this "homework" assignment, then the doctor has all of the information he needs to prescribe treatment for your problem, and he will have more time to spend with you.

Bring along test results and reports. If you have x-rays, scans, blood test results, or other reports that pertain to your problem, bring them to your appointment. If you don't, the doctor doesn't have all the information he needs to address your case, and you may be asked to repeat a test. It is quicker for a doctor to order a test again than to go searching for your records. You can avoid this by taking the time to have it all together before your appointment.

Making the most of your doctor's visit

Arrive early to complete paperwork before you see the doctor, especially if you are seeing a doctor for the first time. If you don't, the physician will have to take time during your visit to complete the information, and this takes away from your time with the doctor discussing your problem. This is important because these documents must be completed for insurance to pay doctors for the services provided.

When you meet with the doctor, don't waste time with small talk. Get down to business. The more time you spend on relevant information, the more time the doctor will have to make the diagnosis and talk about treatment, and the better your care.

Tell the doctor about your complaint. As mentioned before, talk to the doctor about no more than two complaints per visit. Be prepared to answer the following questions about the complaint:

- Onset ~ When did the problem begin? Have you had previous episodes, or is this the first time it's ever happened?
- Frequency ~ How often is it bothering you? Daytime, nighttime, once a week, several times each day?
- Aggravation ~ What makes it worse?
- Relief ~ What makes it better?

Dr. Given stresses that you should be sure to focus on what is really bothering you. For example, suppose you are concerned that a problem you are having is related to a previous illness. Bring up your concerns with the doctor,

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even if it sounds unlikely. Your doctor may be able to run a very simple test to rule out an illness and ease your concerns.

Focus only on the complaints of one patient. Avoid giving the doctor complaints from various family members. If the appointment is for your son, then you should concentrate on your son and not talk about your daughter's problems, too. Often times, patients think the doctor just doesn't care when he doesn't allow these issues to be brought up; however, it is only fair to you and him both to address the concerns of just one patient because of the time limitations.

Be honest with your doctor. If you haven't been taking your medication, tell your doctor. If you have been doing things that are hazardous to your health, such as drinking more than you should, tell your doctor. If you don't, you aren't giving your doctor all the information he needs to make an intelligent decision and this could result in your treatment not working. You only hurt yourself if you are not honest with your physician. Keep in mind that the doctor, as a professional trying to give you the best care, is not concerned with judging you.

Question prescribed medication. As a result of your doctor's visit, you will likely receive a prescription for medication. Before you leave the office, be sure that you know the particulars about the medication by asking questions.

Begin by asking, "What is the medication supposed to do?" Some medications are made to cure and others are made to simply lessen the problem. Make sure that you know what to expect. Ask your doctor how quickly the medication will work. Will you see results in an hour, a day, a week, or longer?

Is the medicine well studied? Some are newer which sometimes means they are better, and sometimes not. Newer medications are not as well studied as older medications.

Is there a less costly alternative? Often times, other less expensive medicines work just as well in treating a problem. Asking this question allows the patient to be a contributor toward controlling healthcare costs.

Is the medicine really necessary? Talk to your doctor about other treatment methods - things that you might do that don't involve medicines such as watching and waiting

to see if the problem gets better on its own. It takes a lot longer for the doctor to go over the alternatives; therefore, doctors are more likely to write a prescription.

Lastly, are there side effects and risks with the medication? Most medicine will have some side effects that some patients will experience and others will not. These tend to be a nuisance - upset stomach, light-headedness, dry mouth, sleep interruptions, and appetite changes. These are not serious, but something to watch for.

More importantly, concentrate on the risks associated with the medicine. These are rare. Otherwise, the medication wouldn't have been approved for use with patients. You need to know about the risks so you can watch for symptoms. For example, if your doctor says this medication could damage a certain organ, you need to ask, "Well, what are the signs that this is happening?"

Question prescribed tests or studies. If the doctor orders lab work, a biopsy, x-rays, or other studies, you'll need to ask a few questions. Begin by asking what the test is supposed to reveal. Is the test just a screening used to rule out a possible diagnosis or is it definitive?

Is there a risk to having the procedure done? Just as with medication, tests can also carry risk. Be sure that you understand the risks associated with the procedure.

Is there any alternative to performing the test? Sometimes you can choose between two different tests, examining the pros and cons of both tests. Other times, you can decide not to take the test at all. Be sure to ask, "What is the risk of waiting - of not doing anything?" Sometimes it is possible to wait and see what will happen with the problem.

In the limited time that you are able to spend with your doctor, you will receive the best care if you prepare for your appointment using these guidelines.