

Tips for Talking with Healthcare Providers

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You are the most important person in your healthcare team, but you might want to think of each person you talk to about your health as an expert you're consulting to get the most from working with your team. Taking this approach means if you want more information, or you need something that isn't being provided, you have the right to ask existing team members – or add to your team. It can be really useful to know how to talk with healthcare providers to ensure you have the best possible team behind you.

Preparing for Your Appointments

Scheduled appointments are the best time to ask questions, so it's useful to prepare these before your healthcare visit. If you can give specific information and ask clear questions, you'll make the most of your time.

It's really useful to write down the following and take it with you to your appointments:

- Any questions you have

- How you have been feeling (physically and emotionally)

- Changes in your body

- Your worries and concerns

- Issues related to treatments and side effects

- Insurance and benefit coverage that could affect health care choices

- Any new support programs and resources you've been using.

When living with ongoing pain, your memory and concentration can be a problem when you attend an appointment, so also think about asking an adult family member or friend to come with you to your appointments to help you take notes.

Getting in Touch With Your Healthcare Team

There may be times in between appointments when you need to talk with your healthcare team. Ask what to do if this happens. If your concerns aren't urgent, but you don't want to wait until the next scheduled appointment, ask to have the person call you. You may also fax or email a list of questions to them, and they can respond and call or email you to talk in more detail.

If you have a medical emergency, contact your hospital emergency room and your healthcare team right away. Do not try to wait until your next scheduled appointment.

Understanding Communication Styles

Each person has a unique communication style. Find a way in which you are comfortable communicating with your healthcare team. This can help you feel more confident about the quality of healthcare you're receiving. For example, you might feel awkward talking about certain concerns or very personal issues, or it might seem to be disrespectful to ask questions of your healthcare team. It can therefore help to write your questions down and even to practice before you go to your appointment. Your healthcare provider is there for you, and although he or she may not be able to answer your questions right then, you'll be able to make another appointment to give you enough time to find out what you need.

Some signs of trouble in communication with your healthcare team might be:

- When you leave the clinic with questions or concerns
- You feel you don't have time to talk about your questions or concerns
- You feel your health providers aren't open to discussing your questions, concerns, or problems.

Improving Communication

If one person can't answer a question, other members of your team may be able to help. Sometimes a member of the healthcare team might suggest getting a second opinion. You could be referred to another person who may be better able to meet your needs. If this happens, it doesn't mean that your healthcare provider doesn't care about your situation; they want to make sure you get the best possible answer from someone who specializes in that area.

- Good communication with your health care team will help you:
- Find out about current information related to your treatment
- Participate in decisions about your medical care
- Better manage your symptoms and get quality follow-up care
- Make the most of the time you have with your healthcare team
- Reduce stress by making sure your questions are answered
- Feel confident that you are getting the best healthcare.

At The End of Your Appointment

There are three questions you can ask at the end of an appointment to make sure you know what you need to do for your health and why:

1. What is my main problem?

- This question helps you check that the healthcare professional has listened to you and identified what he or she can offer.

2. What do I need to do?

- This question makes sure you're clear about the steps you need to take and gives your healthcare professional a chance to clarify if you're not clear.

3. Why is it important for me to do this?

- The answer to this will give you the reason/s for following the advice or recommendations of your healthcare professional.

Another way of doing this is to tell your healthcare professional you want to review what you're going to say to your family when you get home.

Some Final Tips

- **Make the practical side of your situation** clear to help healthcare professionals make suggestions you can use (for example: "It's better for my job if we can come early in the morning.")
- **Learn about your health condition.** Use the Internet as a tool, but stick with reliable sources that the physician will respect. Don't take in stacks of printouts. Organize your questions about the information you've read and be concise. Don't be afraid to ask questions, but try to be specific.
- **Take time to make decisions about care.** If it means having to wait a few days and it's not life-threatening, tell the doctor you need some time to discuss with your family.
- **Hold conversations in appropriate places**, not waiting rooms or corridors. You deserve to have the full attention of the healthcare professional and the privacy that you will find in a room or office.
- **Write it down.** Have everything that's on your mind written down before you arrive. Once you're there, you might forget and start rambling. The more organized you are, the more help you can get.
- **Be appreciative.** Don't forget to thank the healthcare professional for all that he or she is doing. A little kindness and recognition goes a long way.
- **Feel free to change.** If you feel that the healthcare professional is just not a good fit — either professionally or emotionally — ask to see a different doctor in the group or seek out another place of care.