

## How to talk to your doctor: Strategies to help you become assertive and informed about your health

When going to the doctor, many patients feel anxious and often leave their appointment without the information that they need or their questions answered. As a patient, you need to know what your health issues are, what your choices for treatment are, and why you might choose one option over another. It is very important to ask direct questions to your doctor to help you decide what decisions are best for you. There are no silly questions! In fact, if you don't ask questions, your doctor may assume that you understand everything. Remember that your relationship with your doctor should be a partnership, where you work as a team to make the most appropriate decisions for your health.

Here are some strategies to help prepare you for your doctor's appointment, so that you can obtain the information that you need, and so that you can take control of your health care.

### Before Your Appointment:

1. Write down the issues you would like to talk about with your doctor. If you have several health concerns, be sure to discuss your most important concern first. Sometimes it can be difficult and uncomfortable to talk about health concerns that might feel embarrassing, but try to discuss these issues at the beginning of the visit – otherwise, you may feel anxious during the entire appointment and miss important information that your doctor is telling you. It's helpful to remember that most patients have symptoms that are difficult to talk about – you are not the only one, and your doctor has likely had many similar conversations with other patients.
2. Make a list of questions that you want to ask your doctor. Again, start with the most important questions that you have, in case there isn't enough time in the appointment to get to all of the questions you have.
3. Make a complete list of all medications you take (both over-the-counter and prescription). It is important for your doctor to review your medications at each appointment. If you have questions about your medications, be sure to ask your doctor.
4. Keep a log of your symptoms. If you have been feeling ill, try writing down what your symptoms are, when they started, and how often they occur. Doing this on a daily basis before the date of your appointment will help you be prepared with the information your doctor needs to be able to help you. You may also want to write down how your symptoms affect your eating patterns, sleep, or other daily activities.

**During Your Appointment:**

1. It can be helpful to bring a friend or family member with you to your appointment. He or she can be very helpful during the appointment – such as helping you express your concerns to the doctor, and listening to the doctor’s recommendations. You might even ask your friend/family member to write down what your doctor says so that you can review this information later.
2. Try to be organized so that you can obtain all the information you want during the appointment. Try to stay focused on the concerns that you wish to discuss, and go through your prepared list of questions with the doctor.
3. If you are feeling nervous, tell your doctor that you are feeling this way. If your doctor knows this, he or she can help you discuss your concerns in a sensitive way and make you feel more comfortable.
4. Update your doctor on your health since your last visit, such as any new symptoms or worries you have, and how you’ve been feeling in general.
5. If possible, try to take notes or consider tape recording the visit with your doctor. This will ensure that you don’t forget important information later on.
6. If your doctor suggests a test or treatment that you are not comfortable with, it is important to voice your concern. Ask your doctor if there are other choices and options.
7. If you do not feel confident with your doctor’s recommendations, treatment or diagnosis, ask for a second opinion. This might seem awkward, but you have a right to a second opinion, which should be respected by your doctor.
8. If you do not understand what your doctor has told you about your treatment options or diagnosis, ask your doctor to explain it again, or ask other questions until you do understand. You can also ask your doctor to write out specific instructions for you.

When asking questions during your appointment, it is important for you to be honest, clear, and direct. Here are some examples of questions that you might ask:

*Is this problem common or normal for my medical condition?*

*Can my problem be treated? How long will treatment take? What will be required of me during treatment? How will my condition improve after treatment?*

*I don’t really understand what you just said. Could you please explain it again to me?*

*I don’t feel comfortable with that procedure. Are there other treatment options available for me?*

*Are there any good books, brochures or support groups that would be beneficial for me?*

*Do you have any printed materials about my condition?*

*Where else can I go for more information?*

*Could you refer me to other professionals that might be able to help me?*

**Examples of Questions Specific to Body Weight Issues:**

*Does my weight affect my medical condition? If so, how? If I were to lose some weight, how would this make a difference?*

*How much weight would I need to lose before I would notice or experience a difference in my health condition?*

*I have had some trouble losing weight before and keeping it off. How can I improve my success this time?*

*How much physical activity do I need to do?*

*What are the best types of physical activities for me?*

*How often should I check my weight?*

*How much weight can I realistically expect to lose?*

*What should my initial goals be? How do I know if these are attainable or realistic?*

*What are the best ways to meet these goals for myself? What should I do first?*

*What should I do if I get off track or have difficulties meeting my goal?*

*How can my family and friends help me while I try to improve my health?*

*How do I find a dietitian to help me develop a good nutrition plan?*

*Where can I find more information about making healthy changes like this?*

**After your Appointment:**

1. After you have discussed your options with your doctor, be sure to leave the appointment with a plan in place. This includes having specific goals for yourself, with steps you can take to successfully meet these goals.
2. If you feel that it would be helpful to further educate yourself, look for additional information in books or on the internet (although make sure that you are obtaining information from a credible source).
3. If your symptoms or condition do not improve in expected time period, it is important to call your doctor to discuss next steps.
4. If you need to seek a second opinion, be sure to call and make a new appointment with another provider.
5. If you are having trouble with your treatment plan, call your doctor for additional assistance.