



## Making the Most of Your Health Care Visit

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### **Why is it important to prepare for a health care visit?**

When you see a doctor, he or she will ask you questions about your health. You should ask questions too. Together, you and your doctor will make decisions about your health care and any treatment you may need. If you are ready for the conversation, you will be able to speak for yourself and help make the best decisions about your health care.

### **What should I think about before I make an appointment?**

When you make an appointment, you will need to say why you need to see a doctor. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you need an annual checkup with your primary doctor?
- Is your visit about a new problem? Is the problem urgent? If so, be sure to say whether you need to see the doctor right away.
- Is your visit with a new doctor? If so, find out whether he or she accepts your insurance. You will need to bring your health insurance card with you to the visit. You also may need to bring a photo ID.
- Is your visit to see a specialist? With some insurance plans, you need to have a referral from your primary doctor to see a specialist. Make sure you have this referral handy so you can give it to the specialist.

## What should I do before a health care visit?

Before your health care visit, it may help to write down the following information:

- Your questions and concerns. Put your main problem first on your list, so you can bring it up right away. Then list other problems that you want to discuss.
- Your signs and symptoms. These are things you can show or describe to your doctor, such as a rash, swelling, pain, dizziness, or itching. Be ready to describe what your symptoms feel like, when they started, and what makes them better.
- Any medications that you take, including prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs (such as pain relievers), vitamin supplements, and herbal medicines. List why you take each drug, how much of the drug you take, and how often you take it.
- The names and addresses of your past doctors.
- Your health history (see below).

Bring these lists with you to your health care visit.

## What is a health history?

A health history is a record of your general health. You may be asked about your health history over the phone or at your appointment. You may get a health history form to fill out before or during your visit. If you do not understand the questions, the office staff can help you. Include information about the following:

- Illnesses and injuries
- Hospitalizations
- Surgical procedures
- Vaccinations (shots)
- Medications (ones you take now as well as ones you have taken in the past)
- Allergies
- Bad reactions to medications and foods
- Exercise habits, diet, and substance use (including alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use)
- Illegal drug use
- Factors or events that have a major effect on your life, such as stress at work, getting married, or moving
- Family history of disease (including aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, and children)

## How do I get my medical records to a new doctor?

There are two ways a new doctor can get your medical records. First, your old doctors usually can send your health records to your new doctor. A fee may be charged for this service. The second option is for you to bring your records to your new doctor. Your doctor can give you any past medical records, X-rays, and test results, or you may be able to print them from an online patient portal.

## Can I bring another person with me to the appointment?

Yes, you can bring a friend or relative with you to the doctor's office. This person can act as your advocate—someone who knows you and has your best interests in mind. This person may help you remember something during or after the visit. Make sure that you are comfortable sharing private information with this person. If you need to bring young children with you, also bring someone to take care of them while you are with your doctor.

## What if I need an interpreter?

You may need an interpreter if your doctor does not speak your preferred language. Ask the office staff whether they can find an interpreter who is familiar with medical terms. Be sure to give them enough notice. Friends or family members may not make the best interpreters. They may not understand medical terms. Also, you may be discussing sensitive issues with your doctor that you want to keep private.

## What if I have vision or hearing problems?

If you use glasses, remember to take your eyeglasses with you. If you use a hearing aid, remember to wear it and make sure that it works. Let your doctor know if you have trouble seeing or hearing. Feel free to ask your doctor to speak slowly. You also may request a sign language interpreter.

## Who will be in the exam room?

Your doctor may have a chaperone in the exam room. This person usually is a nurse. You can ask for a chaperone if your doctor does not offer one. You also can have a family member with you during the exam. Make your wishes known.

### **Will I be covered during the exam?**

You should be given a gown or sheet if you need to remove your clothes. If the gown or sheet is too big or too small, let your doctor know. Be clear about your modesty needs. If you prefer a female doctor, discuss this before your visit or when you make your appointment. Your doctor should make your physical exam as comfortable as possible. Tell your doctor if something bothers you.

### **What else should my doctor do in the exam room?**

Doctors should wash their hands before and after an exam, but they can forget. If you do not see your doctor wash his or her hands, you can ask, "Have you washed your hands?" Handwashing or hand sanitizing are the best ways your doctor can prevent the spread of infections.

### **How should I talk with my doctor?**

If you have questions, ask them. You have a right to ask questions of anyone who is involved in your health care. Feel free to ask anything about the health care process.

If your doctor asks you questions, answer them as best you can. Be honest.

It is important to make sure you understand everything your doctor says. Ask for simple, clear explanations. Ask your doctor to draw a picture if you think that might help. Take careful notes. If you have a friend or relative with you, ask that person to take notes so you can listen more closely to what is being said.

### **What questions should I ask during the health care visit?**

If you need treatment for a medical condition, ask about your options. When you know all the options, you are more likely to make a good decision. You may want to ask the following questions:

- What might have caused this condition?
- What are the treatment choices?
- What are the benefits and risks of each treatment?
- How might the treatment affect my life?
- Why is it important that I follow the treatment plan?
- What might happen if I do not get treated?

If you need a test, procedure, or surgery, you may want to ask the following:

- Why is it being done?
- What does it involve?
- What do I need to do to get ready?
- What should I expect after the test, procedure, or surgery?
- What are the side effects?
- How will I find out the results?
- How long will it take to recover?

If a medication is prescribed, you may want to ask the following:

- What is the brand and generic name of the drug?
- When should I take the drug?
- Should I take it with food or on an empty stomach?
- Should I avoid alcohol?
- How much of the drug should I take?
- For how long should I take the drug?
- What are possible side effects?
- What should I do about any side effects?
- Is the drug safe to take with other drugs I take?

### **What should I do at the end of the health care visit?**

At the end of your appointment, repeat what you have learned to the doctor. This recap will give your doctor a chance to correct any misunderstandings. Tell your doctor if you need more time to talk about something.

### **What should I do if I am diagnosed with a medical condition?**

If you are told that you have a medical condition, learn as much about it as you can. The more you know about your condition, the more likely you will understand what your doctor recommends. Make sure you have all the necessary information before choosing what procedures to have or what medications to take.

### **Where can I find more health information?**

The internet and your public library offer a lot of health information. When you use the internet, be careful about the websites you use. Some sites have confusing or false information. Websites made by nonprofit organizations (".org") or government agencies (".gov") are best. Also make sure the information is current. Good websites to visit include the following:

- <https://medlineplus.gov> (U.S. National Library of Medicine)
- <https://health.gov> (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- [www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org) (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists)
- [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) (American Cancer Society)

### **Can I contact my doctor after my appointment?**

Yes. Contact your doctor if

- you are confused about something
- you have more questions or concerns
- you start to feel worse
- your medicine does not seem to be helping
- you have had a test or procedure and have not received the results. Do not assume that "no news is good news."

### **How can I contact my doctor after my appointment?**

There are several ways you may be able to contact your doctor. You can call your doctor's office and say you want to talk with your doctor.

Some doctors also may use email to talk with their patients. Ask your doctor if he or she is available by email. Sometimes other staff members in the office may be able to answer some of your questions by email.

Some doctors also may use an online patient portal. This is a website where you can view your health information and send your doctor a message. Ask your doctor if this is an option. There may be a fee for messaging your doctor online.

### **What if I am not comfortable with what my doctor told me?**

If you are not comfortable with the diagnosis or the treatment that your doctor recommends, you can see another doctor. This is called getting a second opinion. Getting another opinion can help you make a more informed decision about your care.

### **If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.**

**FAQ504:** This information was designed as an educational aid to patients and sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. It is not intended as a statement of the standard of care, nor does it comprise all proper treatments or methods of care. It is not a substitute for a treating clinician's independent professional judgment. Please check for updates at [www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org) to ensure accuracy.

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