

Prepare for Your Next Doctor Visit

Be your own health care advocate

By Laura Coyne

Linda Burgess, of Sykesville, MD, is a good example of patient advocacy. When she consults with doctors, either for herself or for her family, she researches, asks questions, and expects direct and complete answers.

Do you make the most of your doctor appointments? Here's how you can maximize your time, no matter how limited, with your practitioner.

Do your own research

Patients should educate themselves as much as possible about a medical condition, disease or other medical problem: What's on the horizon in terms of medical research? Who are the specialists in the field? What new medications are available? Are there herbal supplements that could help? If you have a specific condition, don't stop learning about it.

You can research on the Internet. Check out established medical health sites, governmental health sites, sites associated with disease-related foundations or associations, university health sites, and others. WebMD (www.webmd.com) is one comprehensive site that offers answers to people's health questions. You should also write for free consumer health information whenever possible.

Ask questions

Make a list of your questions before an appointment so that you're ready to ask them during your visit. For instance,

do you take herbal remedies? A recent report finds that St. John's Wort might make chemotherapy less effective. These drug interactions are just one example of what you should discuss with your physician. Another common question is generic drugs. If your prescribed medication comes in a generic form, can you order the generic?

If you print something off the Internet or copy a page from a book, bring it to your doctor's office. Your doctor probably can't keep tabs on every new medical study.

Keep a health file

According to Veena Nayak, MD, people should ask for copies of their medical tests. That way, you can keep your own file. Then when you visit a new doctor or specialist, you can bring that information with you. "We have a fragmented health care community. Sometimes there's not much continuity," says the Schaumburg, IL-based physician. Having your records handy can give a snapshot of your health history.

Keep a record of medications

Whether you're taking prescription medications or over-the-counter drugs, keep a record of names and dosages. Also mention any herbal remedies you've tried. Burgess goes one step further and asks her parents from rural Pennsylvania to provide their medications in a list before they visit any of their children. That list will come in

handy should either of them need medical attention while they're away.

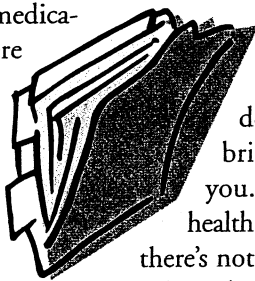
Follow up on your test results

If you don't receive a call from a doctor or nurse within a week regarding any lab results, follow up yourself and ask what the results were. Also, ask what is being tested when blood tests are given.

Keep those appointments

Make your appointment for a yearly physical, and know which specific tests you should have when you reach 40, 50, 60 and beyond. Always let your physician know if you have experienced any changes in your health.

Laura Coyne is editor of Family Safety & Health magazine.



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