

November Education

Patient-Physician Relationship & Health Consumerism

Healthy/Productive Patient-Physician Relationship

Ever walked out of your doctor's office feeling unclear about how to implement a new aspect of your treatment plan, or about the potential side effects of a medication? Or maybe you suddenly remember a list of questions you wanted to address but forgot to ask when you were in the exam room.

Not only can these situations be frustrating, they could potentially damage your health if they prevent you from following your doctor's prescribed course of treatment, keep you from seeking additional treatment or lead to not receiving an accurate and swift diagnosis. That's why self-advocacy is an important skill for anyone navigating the medical system.

It is absolutely critical that patients advocate for themselves," says R. Ruth Linden, Ph.D., an independent health advocate and Founder and President of [Tree of Life Health Advocates](#) in San Francisco. The days of patriarchal medicine are over and patients must be informed consumers of health care."

These steps will help you chart a successful course throughout every phase of your trip to the doctor's office.

Before you arrive

Prepare

Linden suggests taking a moment to consider the purpose of your visit and write it down. Ask yourself if this is a one-time consultation or if you're interviewing a doctor to determine whether you want her to follow you for the long term. The approach you take may be quite different depending on your goal, she says.

Make a list

Jot down questions you want to have answered during your appointment. Review them before your appointment because they may change after you've thought them over, says Linden.

Then prioritize the list in order of importance, as your doctor will likely only have time to discuss a few of the questions in one visit. Many patients are afraid of bothering the doctor or are embarrassed that they will be perceived as uneducated," says Nicole Rochester, MD, a physician, patient and caregiver advocate and founder of [Your GPS Doc, LLC](#).

Asking questions is the only way to ensure you have all of the information you need to care for yourself effectively, she says.

Phone a friend

Ask a friend to accompany you to your appointment to take notes and provide a second pair of eyes and ears. Linden says somewhere between 40 and 80 percent of the information provided by a healthcare provider in the course of a visit is immediately forgotten by patients. Almost 50 percent of the information that is remembered is incorrect, she adds. This is true for patients of all ages, including those with no cognitive or memory problems."

Having an extra set of eyes and ears can reduce confusion and the chance of misremembering the information covered during a visit with the doctor.

During the Appointment

Bring a list

To ensure you're fully prepared for your appointment, keep an updated list of medications and any supplements, herbal treatments, etc., you're currently taking. Rochester says a primary health care provider may not know that a recent trip to a specialist to treat arthritis pain resulted in a change to the medicine you take daily. That could lead to interactions, unwanted side effects or even complications, she says.

Knowing your health history and current medications, etc., will let your doctor know that you are serious about your care and want to make sure your visit is worthwhile, says Rochester.

It will also reduce the risk of miscommunication between health care providers.

Slow things down

Linden stresses that patients should never feel rushed out of the exam room or that their doctor is in a hurry to conclude the appointment.

If your doctor makes you feel rushed, speak up,"she advises. If your doctor doesn't change his or her approach, find another doctor."

And don't be afraid to ask your doctor to speak in lay terms as much as possible.

Don't hesitate to interrupt and ask, Would you please explain that to me in plain language?"And never leave the office until you fully understand the diagnosis, prescribed treatment, upcoming tests or procedures, etc, says Rochester.

It will also reduce the risk of miscommunication between health care providers.

Be persistent

Lisa Doggett, MD, a board-certified family physician in Austin, Texas, learned the importance of persistence several years ago when dealing with her own doctor's office. I kept calling my doctor's office until I found a nurse who went over in detail the results of my blood test over the phone. She first said everything was 'normal.'"

But it was only once Doggett pushed for the details of each tests that she learned she had early menopause at age 41.

If I had not been so persistent, my diagnosis would have been missed," she says

Ask for help

Doggett emphasizes that your doctor's care can extend beyond writing a prescription and checking your blood pressure. You may need to enlist your doctor's help to get a prescription medicine approved or receive free medicine through a patient assistance program, to get an urgent appointment for a test or with a specialist if needed or to help you access extra services you may need, like home health or physical therapy," she says.

A good patient-doctor relationship should include your comfort in speaking up for yourself and asking for help.

Follow up

Rochester says never to assume that no news is good news. Call for results if you don't receive them via a patient portal or phone call from your doctor's office, she advises.

And ask your doctor's office to send you a copy in the mail of any labs or tests that are done in order for you to ensure there's clear communication between your health care providers.

Rochester points out that your primary health care provider may not know if you go into the hospital or visit the emergency

room. Not only should you make sure your doctor knows when you go to the ER or are admitted to the hospital, you should ask the doctor that cares for you in the hospital to send records and also call your primary care doctor to share what happened while you were there, she says.

Similarly, when you see a specialist, your primary care doctor may never know unless you tell them. You should always remind the specialist to send records to your primary care doctor, and you should take notes of any recommendations or medication changes recommended by the specialist," says Rochester.

Seven Tips to be a Smart Healthcare Consumer

Consumers, like me and you, play a key role in all aspects of healthcare delivery because good health doesn't just happen on its own. Taking an active role in your health is the best way to prevent disease, get great care, and reduce costs at the same time. A smart healthcare consumer doesn't just ask the right questions of their doctor, but knows it's also about prevention, self-care, and knowing where to find resources. By being a smart healthcare consumer you can make good decisions that will have a positive impact on your physical and financial health. Here are some tips:

1. Maintain a healthy lifestyle. Healthy living is one area of your life you can control. By exercising regularly, eating a healthy diet, being tobacco free, and getting adequate rest, you may help to ward off preventable chronic conditions such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular disease.

2. Practice prevention and self-care. By getting the age-appropriate health screenings and immunizations, you are taking a proactive approach to prevent potential conditions. In addition, by knowing what you can do at home to help minimize the symptoms of a cold or flu, you can prevent unnecessary trips to the doctor's office. Self-care hand books are a great resource to have on hand, as well as quick access to their online counterpart.

3. Select healthcare providers carefully. Putting in as much time to select a new vehicle or appliance as you do your Primary Care Physician (PCP) will benefit you greatly. Seek recommendations from family and friends, look to your health plan to see which physicians are in-network, and know what you want from a PCP. Once you have narrowed down your list, here are a few other questions you may wish to ask to help you make your decision:

- What are the office hours?
- Is there a covering doctor when the office is closed? If not, what plans are in place for patients to receive care after hours?
- Does the doctor have a subspecialty that fits your needs, such as experience working with children, the elderly, or people with disabilities?

- Is the doctor available over the phone during office hours? If not, is there a nurse who can answer your questions?
- Does the doctor use email?
- What hospital(s) does the doctor use?
- Does he/she use a physician assistant?
- How long does it take and how easy is it to book an appointment?
- What's the average wait time once you've arrived at the office?
- Does he/she generally call or set-up a follow up appointment to inquire about my progress/well-being?

4. Look for ways to save money. There are many ways to save money when it comes to seeking care, such as using in-network doctors and facilities. Look for ways to save on your prescription drugs by asking for a generic equivalent or using the mail order option. You should also check your medical bills and explanation of benefits for accuracy, and seek the most appropriate and cost-effective places for your condition.

5. Seek reliable sources of information. Use resources like the library, your doctor, your health plan provider, and reliable websites that you can trust to help you gather the facts. Make sure the information you collect is based on sound medical research, not the results of a single study, a personal blog, or facts published by a company that will profit by you using its product.

6. Effectively use health plan benefits. Do you know what your co-insurance, deductible, and maximum out-of-pocket are for your health plan? What about covered services under your preventive health benefit? These are the basic things you should know to effectively use your plan.

7. Take an active approach in preventing medical errors. It's everyone's responsibility to prevent medical errors. You can take an active role by asking questions and voicing your concern, triple checking your prescriptions, and by keeping track of your test results. If you have to have a procedure, be sure to research outcomes and costs, choose a doctor and hospital that has experience in your procedure, understand how to prepare for your surgery, and make sure you understand the proper care you'll need after your hospital stay.

Having a better relationship with your doctor: Benefits of Effective Communication with your physician

Effective doctor-patient communication is a central clinical function, and the resultant communication is the heart and art of medicine and a central component in the delivery of health care. Main goals of current doctor-patient communication are creating a good interpersonal relationship, facilitating exchange of information, and including patients in decision making. Effective doctor-patient communication is determined by the doctors' bedside manner, which patients judge as a major indicator of their doctors' general competence.

Good doctor-patient communication has the potential to help regulate patients' emotions, facilitate comprehension of medical information, and allow for better identification of patients' needs, perceptions, and expectations. Patients reporting good communication with their doctor are more likely to be satisfied with their care, and especially to share pertinent information for accurate diagnosis of their problems, follow advice, and adhere to the prescribed treatment. Patients' agreement with the doctor about the nature of the treatment and need for follow-up is strongly associated with their recovery.

Studies have shown correlations between a sense of control and the ability to tolerate pain, recovery from illness, decreased tumor growth, and daily functioning. Enhanced psychological adjustments and better mental health have also been reported. Some studies have observed a decrease in length of hospital stay and therefore the cost of individual medical visits and fewer referrals.

A more patient-centered encounter results in better patient as well as doctor satisfaction. Satisfied patients are less likely to lodge formal complaints or initiate malpractice complaints. Satisfied patients are advantageous for doctors in terms of greater job satisfaction, less work-related stress, and reduced burnout.

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