

## **Getting the Most Out of Your Doctor's Appointment: Prepare, Prepare, Prepare**

### **How to Prepare for a Doctor's Appointment**

In today's managed care environment the time you spend face-to-face with your physician is limited. To get the most from your health care providers, you'll need to meet them halfway, and preparation is the key. If you come prepared with the details and history of your problem, anticipate questions, know your medications, and bring medical records you increase the likelihood of an accurate diagnosis. And if you are anxious about doctor appointments, good preparation will go a long way to alleviate that anxiety. The following tips can help you make the most of your appointment.

#### **Organize your history**

What is the process of diagnosis? The majority is buried in the history – a description of the problem. What "Star Trek" and "ER" fail to show is the process of sifting through that description to locate the nuggets of pertinent information. While it's true that additional information is gleaned from the physical exam, laboratory and imaging tests, it is the history that provides direction for the investigation. The more organized your presentation, the easier it will be for your doctor to arrive at a diagnosis. Keeping a journal of your symptoms may be helpful. If you feel it might be necessary, enlist a relative or friend to help you prepare and/or accompany you to the appointment. Physicians appreciate an accurate history whether it comes from the patient or someone who clearly knows the problem. (If someone does accompany you, be sure there's unified agreement to the story. Bickering in the exam room is counterproductive.)

In describing your problem, be specific. Telling the doctor you "feel ill" is not as helpful as, "I feel warm, ache all over, especially in my back, and I'm coughing up yellow stuff." Give as much information as you can. If you have more than one problem, talk first about the one that worries you the most. Prepare a separate history for each problem and strive to make it clear and complete. Present them one at a time so you don't confuse your physician.

#### **Anticipate what the doctor needs to know**

Let's say that, for example, you have pain. (If you have more than one type of pain you may need to describe each pain separately.) You should be prepared to answer the following questions:

- Where is the pain most severe?
- When did it start?
- Does anything trigger it?
- Is there anything you could do to bring it on, make it better, make it worse?
- Is it present every day, or do you have pain free days?
- Is it worst in the morning, as the day goes on, or constant?
- On a scale of 1-10, how severe is the pain?
- Is it constant or off and on?
- Do you have any other symptoms with it, such as chest pain, shortness of breath?
- Does the pain stay in one area or spread to other areas?
- Does it interfere with your daily routine?
- What has been its course? (Is it stable, or getting worse?)
- Is this a new symptom or a recurrence of a previous problem?

These questions apply to most problems or symptoms. If you've thought about how you would answer them ahead of time you'll be prepared, your response time will be shortened and this may leave more time to discuss your concerns before the end of the appointment.

## **Know your medications**

Another aspect of preparation is knowing what medications you take. Although you may recognize your pill as "the little blue one," there are probably hundreds of pills that are little and blue. The likelihood of your doctor being able to identify your blue pill is slim. Put ALL your medications – prescription, non-prescription, vitamins, herbs, minerals, each in its original container – in a bag and take them with you to your appointment. This way the doctor will know the medication, dosage, frequency and your need for refills. If you take medications chronically, keep an updated card in your wallet or purse with the names of the drugs, dosage and frequency. This is important if drug interactions are to be avoided. It's not uncommon for patients to be seen by several specialists each of whom prescribes different medications. Each doctor needs to know what drugs you are taking, including those prescribed by other physicians. They assume you will be able to list all medications you currently take. If you can't tell them, you may put yourself at risk.

## **Medical Records**

If you have any copies of medical records from other physicians bring them with you. Also bring X-rays or MRIs with you if appropriate. If you are being referred by another physician, try to expedite the exchange of medical records. Very often, you'll need to consent to your records being released to the new physician. Not every doctor's office will anticipate this or contact you beforehand to arrange for the transfer of records. To make the most of the appointment, call ahead and ask how these arrangements should be made. A transfer of your records may help you avoid repeat diagnostic tests which carry their own risk and expense. Also, if you're H.M.O. (health maintenance organization) allows a consultation with a specialist, your first visit may be your only one with that doctor, so it helps to be as prepared as possible.

## **Before Your Visit: Checklist**

- Bring your insurance cards and any forms you need filled out.
- Make a list of things you want to talk to your doctor about and take it with you.
  - [Preparing for Your Doctor's Visit Worksheet](#) - PDF
  - [Take Notes During Your Visit Worksheet](#) - PDF
- Make a list of all medicines (both prescription and over-the-counter) and vitamins/minerals you take. Write down the name, strength and how often you take it. List refills you need approved.
- Bring a notepad, tape recorder, or a trusted relative or friend to help you take notes.
- If you have more than one health care provider, keep your own medical history file. Put results of tests and family history in the file and take it with you to share with your doctor. Keep it up to date.
- If you need an interpreter, let the receptionist know when you schedule your appointment so someone can be there when you arrive.
- If you are using scheduled transportation and need to reserve a pick-up time, ask the receptionist how much time you should allow for the visit.