

Getting the Most Out of Your Doctor's Appointment: While You're There

During Your Visit: Don't be Afraid to Ask or to Tell

- Make sure you understand what your doctor says. Ask your doctor to explain medical words, tests and treatments. If you have questions or don't understand, ask your doctor to explain or repeat.
- Ask your doctor to write down instructions for you or write them down yourself and read them back.
- Ask your doctor where you can find more about your problem or the treatment.
- Be honest with your doctor about your diet, exercise, tobacco use, alcohol or drug use. Your visit is confidential, and not telling your doctor something important can be harmful.
- If you are deaf or hard of hearing, let the receptionist know how to signal you when it's your turn.
- If you read lips, let your doctor know so he will be sure to face you and make eye contact and not speak through a mask.

Request a verbal summary

In the stressed and compressed time of a doctor's appointment it's very common for communication to be impaired. A recent survey of how much patients recalled following a general exam revealed that most could not remember more than of the medical problems their doctor diagnosed! Would you consult your banker, tax preparer or clergyman and leave the meeting without making sure you understood what was discussed? While many HCPs are aware of the need to restate treatment plans or medication adjustments, others may not do so. Sometimes time restrictions decrease the amount of verbal reinforcement the doctor can offer. Ask for a brief summary to make sure all points are covered and necessary prescriptions filled out. Ask what kind of follow-up is needed. Be prepared to take notes.

Questions you should ask during a visit with your HCP

- What is this problem likely to be, among the possibilities?
- Is further diagnostic evaluation necessary?
- What can I expect from the natural course of this problem?
- Is there treatment available to modify the course?
- How long before I should see the effects of the medication?
- Under what circumstances should I notify the doctor?

If your expectation is that all you have to do is show up for an appointment and the doctor will do the rest, your visit is likely to be a frustrating one, and you may put yourself at risk for misdiagnosis. Remember, unlike "Bones," your doctors don't have scanners they can pull out of their pockets to miraculously diagnose your problem. They need your help. The doctor's appointment is your opportunity to discuss medical problems and concerns. By preparing for the appointment you will be less likely to waste the opportunity, and more likely to gain a degree of satisfaction from the visit.