

## Getting the Most Out of Your Doctor's Appointment: Should You Bring Someone?

My father-in-law is a farmer who lives alone thousands of miles away from us in the Midwest. For the last few years, he's been plagued with various health problems, from the slight (sinus infections) to the serious (cancer). But after each doctor's visit, when we'd ask him how he was, the conversation would go something like this:

- "What did the doctor say?"
- "Oh, everything is fine."
- "But what about your medication?"
- "I think he said something about trying a new one."
- "What's the name of it?"
- "I don't remember."
- "What did he say about your headaches?"
- "If they don't go away soon, I guess I'll go back to talk about that."

You get the idea. Between his overly polite nature and the fact that studies show up to 80 percent of what a doctor says to a patient is forgotten, my father-in-law was not getting the most out of his medical care. The solution in his case was to bring his younger brother with him to appointments. For many people, a trusted relative or friend can act as a consultant, translator, secretary, supporter, and advocate in a doctor's office. You may be nervous, preoccupied, or physically unwell, while the other person can listen with an open mind, take note of whatever is said, and remind you of questions you may have forgotten.

Of course, it's important to choose the right person—you need someone who definitely has your best interests at heart *and* who can:

- Listen well but knows when to speak up.
- Be assertive without interrupting or bulldozing you or your doctor.
- Be firm but respectful.
- Be patient. Often you might have a long wait, or the appointment might be canceled at the last minute due to an emergency.

Share a list of your questions and concerns with your support person before the appointment. That way, if you forget any of them, your friend can gently remind you what you wanted to discuss. Ask the person to jot down notes on whatever the doctor says.

Be sure to introduce your companion to the doctor and explain exactly why you brought someone. You don't want to annoy or mislead the doctor. For example, a young woman I know always brought her mother to her appointments for chronic fatigue; she wasn't up to driving herself. But her doctor assumed she was simply overly dependent on her mother and that this neurosis was contributing to her condition!