

Partner with your doctor

When it comes to your health, you can't afford to stand on the sidelines. It's important to be an active part of your healthcare team by talking with your doctor about important ways to improve your quality of life.

Partners communicate

In the past, the doctor typically took the lead and the patient followed. Today, a good patient-doctor relationship is more of a partnership.

One of the most important elements of a good partnership is communication. This may mean asking questions, bringing up problems, and letting your doctor know if you have concerns about something.

The bottom line: When you and your doctor work as a team, you are more likely to achieve better health outcomes.¹



Who's who at the doctor's office?

A doctor may be a medical doctor (MD) or a doctor of osteopathic medicine (DO). Both are licensed to practice medicine, but their approaches may be different. In addition to a doctor, there are many healthcare professionals that may provide care at a doctor's office:

- **Nurse practitioners (NPs)** are nurses with additional training in medicine, allowing them to treat certain medical conditions without the direct supervision of a doctor.
- **Registered nurses (RNs)** are graduates from a nursing program who have passed a board exam to be licensed by the state.
- **Physician assistants (PAs)** have completed advanced medical training, allowing them to diagnose and treat patients, prescribe medications, and possibly serve as a primary healthcare provider.

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Tips for a good doctor-patient partnership

The following are to learn about five tips for good communication with your healthcare provider.

1 Find the right doctor

Your primary care physician (PCP) is often considered to be your main doctor. This is the person who coordinates all of your care. When choosing a doctor, it's a good idea to:

- **Consider which qualities matter most to you.** For example, is it important that your doctor's office be close to home? Do you care if your doctor is a man or a woman? Is it important that your doctor is associated with a specific medical center or hospital?
- **Ask questions to learn about the doctor and their office staff.** Pay close attention to the office staff; they are an extension of the doctor and you will likely have to communicate with them often.
- **Select a doctor you could work well with.** If you are not satisfied with the information you receive, keep looking.



Tips for making the most of your time with your doctor

You may not have much time with your doctor, so it's important to take steps to make best use of the time you do have.

- **Be honest.** You may be tempted to say what your doctor wants to hear, but this isn't in your best interest. Your doctor can help you more if you say what is really going on.
- **Choose which questions are most important.** Pick three or four questions or concerns that you most want to talk about with your doctor.
- **Stick to the point.** Keep in mind that each patient is given a limited amount of time with the doctor, so be as concise as possible. For example, share a brief description of your symptom, when it started, how often it happens, and if it is getting better or worse.
- **Remember, your doctor may not be able to answer all your questions.** Even the best doctor may be unable to answer some questions.

2 Prepare for your visit

In order to get the most out of your doctor's appointments, it's important to have a plan and be prepared.²

These tips can make it easier for you and your doctor to cover everything:

- **List your concerns—in order of priority.** Your list may include a new symptom you've been experiencing, a question about screenings or vaccines and concerns about how a treatment is affecting your daily life.
- **Bring everything you may need.** This may include your medications, medical records and insurance cards.
- **Ask a friend or family member to come with you.** This can be helpful if you often forget what you wanted to discuss with your doctor or have a hard time remembering what your doctor said.
- **Request an interpreter, if necessary.** If the doctor you selected or were referred to doesn't speak your language, call the doctor's office ahead of time and ask for an interpreter.



Tips for making the most of your time with your doctor

It's easy to forget a lot of what your doctor tells you or, in some cases, get confused about what he or she says.

- **Ask about anything that seems unclear.** Ask questions like: "I want to make sure I understand. Could you explain that a little more?"
- **Take notes.** Write down the main points or ask your doctor to write them down for you. With your doctor's opinion, you may also wish to record what is said.
- **Get some extra material.** Ask your doctor if he or she has any brochures, DVDs or other materials about your health conditions or treatments. You can also ask if your doctor recommends any other sources (e.g. websites or nonprofit organizations).
- **Talk to other members of your healthcare team.** Nurses, pharmacists, physician assistants or physical therapists may be able to take more time with you than a doctor.

3 Share with your doctor

You are an important part of your healthcare team, and your doctor relies on you to share information about your health.²

Here are some things you may need to share with your doctor:

- A clear and brief report of symptoms you're experiencing
- Information about all the medicines you take, including supplements
- Your lifestyle habits, such as what you eat, how much exercise you get, and your stress level

It's important to talk to your doctor about sensitive subjects, even if you're embarrassed or uncomfortable. These topics may include:

- Memory loss
- Depression
- Family problems
- Fear of falling
- Incontinence
- Sexuality

It may help to use brochures or booklets as "props" to introduce topics you may feel awkward discussing.

Note: A good doctor will take your concerns seriously and not brush them off.

4 Get the information you need.

In addition to sharing with your doctor, it's important to learn from your doctor by asking questions and listening to what he or she has to say.²

Here are some things you should learn about:

- **Medical tests.** Before having a medical test, ask your doctor to explain why it's important, what it will show, and how much it will cost. You should also get detailed instructions about how to prepare for the test.
- **Your health conditions.** Ask your doctor to tell you the name of each condition you have and why you have it. You can also ask how it may affect you and how long it might last.
- **Your medications.** Make sure you know the names of the drugs you are being prescribed, what it is being used for, and all instructions for how to take it. Ask about the common side effects, too.

5 You're in control

You are the one who makes decisions about your care, so it's important to be hands-on with your health.²

Over time, the relationship you develop with your doctor will make it more and more comfortable for you to share more with your doctor—including when you disagree with a diagnosis or the best way to treat something. Whether you agree or disagree with your doctor, the open communication keeps you both working together toward the same goal: your health.

Keep in mind: You will benefit most from a treatment when you know what's going on and are involved in making decisions.²

To make decisions with your doctor, you should:

- Continually build a positive relationship with your healthcare team
- Find out about different treatment options, including the pros and cons for each one
- Learn about prevention—and follow your doctor's advice to improve your health

Notes

References

¹National Institute on Aging
<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/why-being-able-talk-your-doctor-matters>

²National Institute on Aging
https://order.nia.nih.gov/sites/default/files/2017-07/TWYD_508.pdf

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