



Prior to the Visit: Prepare Yourself

Call your doctor's office a day or two before your scheduled visit to check whether you should skip breakfast or lunch. Some blood tests require that you show up with an empty stomach. Knowing this beforehand can save you another trip to the lab.

If you have medical insurance, be sure to take any insurance cards you'll need to present at the office for reimbursement.

If your condition is complicated or you are trying to make serious decisions about your health and can get overwhelmed easily, consider bringing along a family member or friend to your appointment. Your "appointment buddy" can help take notes, ask questions and give you support. Set some rules ahead of time: Do you want him or her to step outside during the physical examination? Can sensitive personal information be openly discussed? How proactive should he or she be?

Then sit down and think about what you want to get out of the visit. This is the time to understand that your 15 minutes cannot address everything. You may have five or six issues on

your mind, but realistically you're going to have time to deal with, at most, your top three. Decide what these are before going in. Consider making a second appointment or booking a double appointment if you believe your issues are complicated or so numerous as to require the extra time.

The important point is to set your own priorities for the day you walk into the office.

Seeing the Doctor: Your Time To Be Heard

Show up a few minutes early and be prepared to fill out some forms.

Now is your time to be heard, but you also have a job to do. Start with your most pressing questions right away, the ones you've thought about beforehand. This is not the time to be shy. Like many physicians, I often find patients waiting until the very last minute to bring up important matters that are frightening or perhaps embarrassing. "Oh, and by the way, Doc..." is how this part of the conversation

often begins, but by then, there's almost no time left before the next patient needs to see me.

When recounting your symptoms, be as specific as you can. Your doctor will guide you with questions, but try to be accurate: When exactly did the pain start? What part of the body is affected most? How long does the pain last? Be as descriptive as possible: Is the pain sharp? Does it have a burning quality, or is it dull? Try to remember and report colors, smells, intensity. Every bit of information is important in order to get to the bottom of your condition.

While you are talking, your doctor is already forming a list of possible diagnoses in her mind, taking into account your symptoms, personal history and lifestyle, family history and other factors.

You've done your job as a patient. Now it's the doctor's turn. You should expect to leave your appointment knowing the answers to three questions: *What is wrong? Why? What can I do about it?* In reality, your doctor may not have the definitive an-

swers yet. Tests may be ordered and follow-ups scheduled. But you should at least be given an idea of what the doctor thinks is going on and what treatments may be possible.

You need to understand what the doctor is saying. If you find things confusing, you're not alone. Some doctors use advanced medical vocabulary. Ask them to make it simple. If you still don't understand, ask again. You even can ask to have it explained to you with pictures or illustrations. This is your body, your life, and you have a right to know.

After the Visit: Follow Up

If your doctor prescribed medications, get them filled and start taking them right away. If at any point you have questions, you should call the office. And if you want to learn more on your own, make use of the Internet: A few Web sites with

good general information are: mayoclinic.com, familydoctor.org and medlineplus.gov.

As you leave the office, be sure you've scheduled a follow-up appointment, if necessary. Don't wait until you get home—you may

forget. Finally, use what you've learned to take better control of your health and start preparing for the next appointment. **IK**

Be sure that you understand what the doctor is saying. This is your body and your life.

Know What To Ask:

If your doctor recommends a certain procedure, you should find out:

- Why do I need it?
- How is it carried out?
- How risky is it?
- Is there an alternative?
- Who is going to do it?
- Where will it be done?
- How fast will I get back to normal life?