

How to get the most out of a medical visit

It is unfortunate that sometimes people feel dissatisfied after visiting their health care providers. This is likely due to many factors, including short visit lengths and increasing medical complexity. The following list of suggestions were developed to help you get the most out of a medical visit, and are especially important when seeing a new provider.

Medication list

Bring a list that includes all current medications with doses, including herbals and over-the-counters. Bring the list of active ingredients in herbals because like it or not, most doctors are not that familiar with these products, and there can be several different formulations with the same active herbal ingredient.

Example: Even if your provider knows that ma huang is dangerous, he/she may not know whether “Brand X Energy pills” contain that herb.

Allergy list

Bring an allergy list, and be sure to include the reaction. Both true allergies and adverse reactions are important for your provider to note. Making your provider aware of adverse reactions, even if they are not true allergies, can help prevent you from using a drug that has caused you problems.

Example: One patient had tried a medication in the past and couldn't remember the side effect but knew it caused her problems. Because there was no documentation of the date and the reaction, her insurance company would not cover a different drug until she tried it again to document the adverse reaction.

Medical history

Bring your medical history. This should include medical problems, surgeries, key tests with results, and hospitalization dates. Having the actual records if possible are helpful because you may not be aware of the significance of some pieces of information in your records and relying on patients' memory alone can sometimes lead to incomplete or even inaccurate records.

Example: A patients said he had a heart attack but upon reviewing the records, he was admitted to rule out a heart attack and it was *ruled out* as the cause of his symptoms. Think about how stressful it is to be ill and to be hospitalized. It is no surprise that some detail from a hospitalization that could hold significance for the future could slip your mind.

Family history

Bring a list of family members' medical problems. For family history, it is helpful to have as many details as possible. This can sometimes be aided by interviewing your family members to get accurate information. Get as many details as you can, including the age at which the person was affected by the condition. For cancer, the type of cancer is very important.

Example: It is important to know the age at which someone developed colon cancer because screening for the condition should start 10 years prior to the age at which the youngest first degree family member developed it.

Example: It is important to know the age at which a family member had their first heart attack because coronary heart disease is a major risk factor for heart disease if it occurred in a first degree relative *before age 65 in women and 55 in men*. This could affect whether you need to be treated with cholesterol medications.

Providers may not inquire about family history again after the first visit, so if a new illness occurs in your family, mention it to your doctor in case it affects your risk.

Example: If your sister gets diagnosed with breast cancer, it may signify that you will need to be screened with a mammogram earlier or screened with a more sensitive modality, such as a breast MRI.

Immunization history

Bring the dates of all of your immunizations.

Example: Tetanus immunization is supposed to be boosted every 10 years, and is one of the most commonly missed vaccinations.

List of issues, prioritized

You may have heard the suggestion to bring a list of issues to each medical appointment so that your concerns are addressed. It is true that this can be helpful because sometimes the patients' expectations for a visit are very different than providers' expectations for a visit because providers are increasingly being expected to achieve certain outcomes.

Example: You may be perfectly satisfied with an LDL ("bad") cholesterol of 130 because it is an improvement from a previous LDL of 180. However, if you have coronary artery disease or diabetes, your provider will not have adequately treated you according to current guidelines until your LDL is less than 100. Therefore, your provider may be focusing on the cholesterol when you may want to talk about a pain which is more concerning to you that day.

It is helpful to make your list known at the beginning of the appointment so the provider knows to allot time to the items on the list. If the provider does not know that you have concerns you want to address, he/she may fill up the available time addressing chronic problems and then your concern gets a rushed evaluation at the end. Sometimes not every item on the list can be addressed in one visit because providers have a limited amount of time with each patient. If you are understanding about this, and have your list in order of priority, hopefully, the issues of the most importance to you will get covered at that visit and another visit can be scheduled to address the remaining issues. Providers sometimes *have* to re-prioritize the list if there is something potentially life-threatening. To enhance this process, make it clear that you are asking the questions because you trust the provider's opinion. It is important that you do not ask in a threatening way so that they think you are challenging them or lack trust in them.

For women

It will benefit you to make sure your provider is informed of any issues that are specific to women's issues. Sometimes people do not tell their providers about sensitive issues unless they are specifically asked even though help may be available.

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Example: If you are of childbearing age, tell your provider whether or not fertility is desired. This will allow your provider to avoid prescribing medications that may be dangerous if you were to get pregnant, or to help you choose a method of contraception if pregnancy is not desired. (Half of all pregnancies in the US are unintended, and this commonly occurs in perimenopausal women.)

Example: Tell your provider whether you are having any hot flashes, sexual dysfunction, incontinence, or other symptoms potentially related to menopause because there may be treatments that could help.

Women should include pregnancy complications in their medical history because some can be risk factors for future medical problems.

Example: Gestational diabetes is a risk factor for future diabetes and preeclampsia is a risk factor for future cardiovascular disease. Knowledge of these conditions could help your doctor monitor you carefully.

Test results

You should follow up on all tests ordered by your provider. It inevitably continues to happen that abnormal results slip through the cracks. You can make absolutely sure that nothing ever slips through the cracks with your healthcare by calling your provider for results of every test if they do not contact you.

Example: A patient had a blood test done and did not call her doctor for a result, assuming that if she had not heard anything, it must be normal. Only when she went for her 4 week check-up was she informed that her test was abnormal and that if it had been addressed earlier, it could have prevented harm.

In summary, while it may seem like common sense to bring most of those things to a medical appointment, people are tremendously busy and may forget to do these things. Just like anything else in life that is difficult to remember, you should set up strategies to help you remember to do these things, like making lists and using reminder systems. Your visit will be enhanced if you are well-prepared for it.

This article is a written summary of a discussion by Dr. Laura Davisson from the 2008 Women on Wellness (WOW) Retreat. Dr. Davisson is an internal medicine physician at WVU. She is the Clinic Director of the Center of Excellence in Women's Health. The 2009 WOW Retreat will be held from 8-5 on August 1 at Heston Farm in Fairmont, WV. Dr. Laura Davisson will be discussing weight management this year. To register, go online to www.wvhealthywomen.org, e-mail ecparsons@hsc.wvu.edu or call 304-293-2895.