

How to Talk So Your Doctor Will Listen

Learn these tips before your next appointment

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Be prepared for your next doctor's visit with these helpful tips.

If you've ever felt like your doctor isn't listening to you, it may be true. Studies have found that doctors let patients speak for only 23 seconds on average before cutting them off; in one University of South Carolina study, primary care patients were interrupted just 12 seconds after the physician entered the exam room.

When there's less doctor-patient dialogue, patients are not only more likely to leave the office frustrated, but they're also at greater risk of being misdiagnosed. Want to make up for the time crunch? Try these strategies to maximize your office visit and talk so your doctor will listen.

Make a human connection

Before you dive into your concerns, break the ice with a greeting or even a joke. "Doctors are people first, and we're much more receptive when a patient begins a conversation with a simple, 'How's your day going?' " explains Katie Neuendorf, M.D., medical director for the Center of Excellence in Health Care Communication at the Cleveland Clinic.

Stay on message

Most doctor visits last 13 to 16 minutes, according to Medscape's 2016 "Physician Compensation Report," so after your greeting, get to the point. "Oversharing information unrelated to your medical concerns takes time away from tailoring a treatment plan," Neuendorf says.

Tell the whole truth

You can't expect a doctor to listen to your complaints, or adequately resolve them, if you're not forthright. Tell your doctor about your fear of falling, substance abuse, sexual dysfunction or changes in sleep patterns.

Rehearse before you go

If you're uncomfortable discussing embarrassing topics, write a script and rehearse it in front of a mirror. Use words like incontinent, bowel movements and diarrhea so that when you're talking to the doctor, you'll be more comfortable saying them aloud.

Don't accept 'it's just aging'

If you have a symptom that has come on suddenly, keeps you up at night or interferes with your daily life, be specific about the changes you've noticed. "For example, you could say, 'I've always been on time for appointments, but lately I'm forgetting them entirely. Is there a test you can do to rule out a more serious cognitive issue?'," says Mary Jane Minkin, M.D., clinical professor in the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences at Yale Medical School.

Don't save questions for the end

Once your doctor is halfway out the door, he or she is already thinking about the next patient. Instead, come with a list of concerns and address them within the first few minutes of your visit, Minkin suggests.

Explain what you can afford

Most doctors don't have a clue about patients' out-of-pocket costs. Some aren't even sure which procedures, prescriptions and lab tests are covered by insurance or Medicare. "But that doesn't mean they're not willing to work with you to lower costs," Neuendorf says. If you can't afford a prescription, ask your doctor for an alternative, or ask him or her to help you prioritize your medications, so you know which ones you can skip and which ones are nonnegotiable.

Have that end-of-life discussion

Talk to your family about what you want done when you are near death, and make sure your doctor is aware of those wishes. "Writing it down as part of an advance directive isn't enough," says David Grube, M.D., medical director of the nonprofit Compassion and Choices in Denver. "Make sure there's a document in your medical chart that spells out exactly what you want. With smartphone technology, you can even take 90 seconds and film an advance directive in your physician's office." For help with managing end-of-life care, go to compassionandchoices.org/eolc-tools.

Don't go it alone

Bringing a loved one or family member to your medical visits can help ensure that the doctor listens to you and answers your questions. Your loved one can take notes, remind you about issues you wanted to discuss and help you remember doctors' instructions after the visit is over.

Don't be afraid to make a switch

If your doctor rushes through visits, doesn't address your questions or fails to listen to you without interrupting, look for a new physician. "There's no shame in finding someone who's a better fit," Grube says.

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