

health notes

Family doctors: Making the most of your visit

Your family doctor treats you and tracks your health care through the different stages of life, usually takes care of your family members too, and understands how all the different systems in the body work and how they affect each other.

BEFORE THE VISIT

Scheduling/cancelling your appointment

Schedule your appointments well in advance. Whenever possible, tell the receptionist the reason for your visit. Confidentiality is always respected, and knowing the reason for your visit can improve your doctor's preparation by deciding how long to allow for the appointment, making sure test results are available, etc. Patients with chronic conditions who require regular visits should make sure they book their next appointment as they leave their current appointment. For the rest of us, the doctor can often see us the same day if the situation is urgent, but we may need to wait a day or two in other circumstances.

If you need to cancel your appointment please do so at least 24 hours in advance if possible. Some offices will charge you for the cost of the visit if cancellation procedures are not followed – your physician will not get paid if you fail to arrive and the time that was set aside for you could have been used by another patient waiting for an appointment.

Know your medicines

Gather a list of the *non-prescription* medicines you are taking such as vitamins, herbal remedies, and minerals, including the amount you take of each. Often these medicines, as well as recreational drugs and alcohol, can interact with prescribed medications you are taking, so it's important your doctor know.

Also, know what *prescription medications* you are taking. It's a good idea to bring all your medicines into your doctor's appointment, so when you and your doctor are talking, you both know you are talking about the same "little blue pill."

Most family doctors will not refill prescriptions over the phone. In general, enough medicine has been prescribed for you to last until the doctor needs to see you again, at which time he or she will re-evaluate your condition and if necessary make changes to your medication.

Bring your medications

Make sure you have your list of all your non-prescription remedies, as well as the bottles of your prescribed medications so that you and your doctor are talking about the exact same thing.

Let your doctor know if any refills are coming up on your prescriptions. Even though he or she has a list of your medicines, you will know exactly when the bottle will be empty.

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Have your facts straight

Knowing that your doctor will ask you about your symptoms, think ahead about what you want to say. Ask yourself what the most troubling issue is you need to discuss. Think in terms of telling your doctor a story about your experience in a sequential way, and be able to answer these four questions:

LOCATION – Where does it hurt? Know the location well enough to be able to point to the precise place on your body.

DESCRIPTION – What does it feel like? Describe specific symptoms and don't try to provide the diagnosis.

DURATION – How long has this been bothering you, and is your symptom on and off or constant?

INTENSITY – How bad is it? This can be tricky to describe, but sometimes the best way is to say how it affected what you were doing. Was the symptom severe enough that you had to pull your car over and stop driving? Are you unable to comfortably walk up or down the stairs? Have you been too nauseated to eat? What have you been doing that eases the pain or discomfort?

If you're coming in for a Pap test, know when your last period was.

If you have a list of complaints, write them all down and bring the list to your doctor's appointment. The doctor will scan the list to determine which may be related and possibly part of the same problem, or, with you, determine which problem is most pressing and should be treated in the current office visit.

Wear appropriate clothing

If you expect the doctor to physically examine you, wear clothing that will not hamper the exam. For example, wear shirts with loose sleeves if you expect your blood pressure to be taken, and if you need to undress, don't wear multiple layers of clothing.

DURING THE VISIT

Prioritize health issues

Since it often takes 10 to 12 minutes to assess a single problem and decide on a treatment, the doctor may only be able to treat one problem in a single office visit. It is to your benefit to have the doctor spend the limited amount of time thoroughly analyzing one issue. The patients still waiting to see the doctor will appreciate it too.

Bringing a friend or family member to your visit

Sometimes it's a good idea to bring a support person with you to your appointment. If you are anxious or if there are language barriers, you may not hear or understand all that is being said. It can be beneficial for two people to listen to the explanation and ask questions.

However, do not try to squeeze extra people in to see the doctor during your appointment. Time has been allotted for one patient visit, the patient chart has already been pulled, and it's not fair to the patients still waiting to have their appointment delayed.

Armed with medical information from the library or Internet

Although the doctor appreciates the research you have done on your health condition, he or she does not have the time to read 20 pages downloaded from the Internet or copied from books. It's also important to get your information from legitimate sources. Highlight one or two lines that summarize the findings and spend the rest of the time in discussions with the doctor.

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WHEN TO VISIT THE DOCTOR

Vs. A walk-in clinic...

It may sometimes be necessary to visit a walk-in clinic instead of going to your family doctor. Unlike your family doctor's office, walk-in clinics will probably have no medical history on you or your family. Therefore, it is important you ask the walk-in clinic to fax a copy of your medical report to your family doctor. In addition, if follow-up care is needed, make the appointment with your family doctor. Walk-in clinics are for quick, urgent care when you cannot get an appointment with your family doctor.

... Or the emergency department

Make sure your problem really is an emergency. Waits are prioritized based on severity in the emergency department, which are often extremely busy. Non-stop bleeding, sudden onset of severe pain, or loss of function of a body part are reasonable reasons to visit emergency. A sore back for several weeks, cold or flu symptoms, or a phase of tiredness should not be seen in emergency. Instead make an appointment with your family doctor.

AFTER THE VISIT

When you leave the doctor's office, make sure you follow the prescribed treatments, get done any lab tests or X-rays that have been ordered, fill your prescription, and make follow-up appointments if you have been asked to do so by your doctor.

You will be satisfied with the health care you receive if you are honest about your health problems, take responsibility for addressing them with your doctor, and follow through with the treatment you and your doctor agreed on.

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This information is also available as a printed pamphlet, along with pamphlets on other health topics, at www.bcma.org

This information is provided as a supplement to your doctor's care, and while we have made every effort to ensure its accuracy, it is not a replacement for medical advice. Please contact your doctor with any questions.