

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR



Have you ever left your doctor's office feeling that you didn't get to discuss all your concerns? Or that the doctor didn't really understand you? You are not alone. It can be difficult to express yourself clearly when you're in pain and have a limited amount of time to talk.

This brochure contains some tips to help you make the most of your medical appointments. If you arrive prepared, you're more likely to leave feeling satisfied.

Preparing for a medical appointment

First of all, organize your thoughts before meeting with your doctor. Make an agenda or jot down a few notes to help you remember what you want to say or ask. Start by listing all your questions and concerns. Then fine-tune the list by prioritizing what's currently most important to you. That way, you'll be sure to cover at least your priorities, even if you don't have time to discuss everything on the list.

At the appointment

At the beginning of your appointment, ask your most important questions and mention your top concerns. You and your doctor can then decide what you will discuss in the visit. Express yourself clearly and don't be afraid to speak up right away. (If you wait until the end of the appointment, there probably won't be enough time left.) Also, be sure to tell your doctor how you are feeling emotionally. For example, you may be feeling fragile, vulnerable, guilty, sad, or lonely, or any number of other emotions. Perhaps you are afraid you will no longer be the person you used to be, or maybe you are worried about what other people will think. Talking about your fears and feelings is not a sign of weakness. Now is the time to talk to your doctor about these concerns, especially if you have a doctor prepared to listen.

How to describe your pain

Your doctor will be in a much better position to help if you can describe your pain precisely. You should be prepared to answer these questions:

- Where is the pain located?
- How did it start?
- How long have you been feeling it?
- Is it continuous (constant) or intermittent (with periods of lesser intensity)?
- What triggers it, makes it worse, or makes it better?
- How would you describe what the pain feels like in each location?

Pulsing, throbbing, pounding, pinching, squeezing, cramping, crushing, tugging, shooting, stabbing, burning, tingling, stinging, like an electric shock, dull, heavy, aching, numbing, etc.

Don't play down your pain for fear of being seen as a complainer. The more specific you can be when describing your pain, the more likely it will be for your doctor to find the right treatment to help you.

It is also important to describe the kind of tasks you can usually accomplish in the course of a "normal" day. This lets your doctor know which of your ordinary daily activities you can perform.

Finally, be sure to tell your doctor if the pain is interfering with your sleep.

Here are a few quick tips:

- Keep a **list of all your medications** handy at all times, including both prescription and over-the-counter drugs. Your pharmacist can give you a list if you ask for one. Remember to include any natural products you take.
- If you have the **results** of any tests or examinations that your doctor should know about, bring them with you to the appointment.
- Prepare a **list of treatments** you have tried in the past to relieve your pain, noting how effective they have been as well as any side-effects they may have caused.
- Generally speaking, people tend to forget a lot of what the doctor says during a visit. Some research shows that patients retain only 30% of the information discussed. If you find that this happens to you, **take notes about important things** or **ask someone you trust to come with you to the appointment**.
- **Paraphrasing** can be helpful for confirming what the doctor says and making sure you understand. This method involves briefly repeating the more important points back to the doctor. For example: *"If I understand correctly, this medication will help relieve my pain in such and such a way."*

- Before you leave, make sure you clearly understand the **important things to keep track of (or new things to remember)**. Above all, don't be afraid to ask questions. If you are given a new prescription, ask the doctor what it is expected to do, how and when to take it, and what the side effects might be. Your pharmacist can also answer such questions.

Also, your doctor may offer you different **treatment options** for your pain: try to be open to these suggestions. Remember that medications are usually only one part of a treatment program. Pain often requires more than one type of treatment and it can take a number of attempts before the right combination is found for each individual.

Last but not least, make sure you note the **date of your next appointment**.

You and your doctor both want the same thing: your well-being.