

+ THE ULTIMATE CHECKUP: HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR DOCTOR VISITS
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Take charge of your face time

You don't see your doctor that often (hopefully), so you want to make the most of every visit. Here's how to ensure you don't leave the office with any lingering questions and even how to be a favorite patient (yes, really).

HAVING "THE TALK" WITH YOUR DOC Some conversations can be oh-so-awkward that we avoid them—and risk shortchanging our own health care. We asked doctors for some tactful but effective scripts—what to say to make our points clear. “Just asking questions respectfully can go a long way toward good doctor-patient communication,” says Dr. Merrell. “It needs to be a partnership in which you can have conversations rationally.” Here's how to make some common uncomfortable encounters more constructive—and less cringe-worthy.

YOU WANT A SECOND OPINION Patients feel uncomfortable telling their doctors they plan on consulting someone else, but they shouldn't. “As physicians, we're used to patients seeing other doctors, because we offer referrals,” Dr. Chen points out. “When it's approached in a collaborative way, most won't be offended.”
TRY: “I value your input and want to continue care with you, but I'd like to seek out another opinion on this issue. Can you recommend someone for me to talk to?”

YOU HAVE RESERVATIONS ABOUT THE TREATMENT “I have a lot of patients who don't take my advice—I'm sure many doctors do,” says Glen Stream, M.D., in Spokane, Washington, president-elect of the American Academy of Family Physicians. “I believe in honest communication. If the doctor is giving advice and thinks the patient is going to follow it, but the patient thinks it's not in her best interest, she should say so.”

TRY: “I have some doubts about this treatment. Can you suggest other possibilities we might look into?”

SHE RECOMMENDS SOMETHING YOU'VE TRIED BEFORE—THAT DIDN'T WORK Dr. Chen suggests being honest but also keeping an open mind. “If a patient has an objection, I may say, ‘We won't do anything you're uncomfortable with. Now that you're coming to me, I'll try to find out why it didn't work and we can go from there and explore other treatment options.’”

TRY: “I'm apprehensive because I've tried that treatment before. What will be different this time?”

YOUR DOC DOESN'T TAKE YOUR INSURANCE Some doctors, particularly certain specialists, may not accept your insurance—or any insurance. That doesn't necessarily mean you can't be reimbursed, partially or fully, for certain services and treatments, so call your insurance company. Request full itemized receipts from your visits so you can properly submit your claims.

TRY: “Have some of your patients had success with their insurance companies covering these costs?”

FACE, PHONE, OR E-MAIL

Effectiveness of care increased up to 6 percent in patients who had e-mail access to their doctors, a recent study found. Although some offices have been slow to embrace e-mail, when they do, here's how to determine the best method of communication.

A QUICK GUIDE:

WHEN YOU HAVE Recurring symptoms—seasonal allergies or a rash that's back
WHAT TO DO E-mail. Your doctor may encourage you to try at-home or over-the-counter remedies that have worked for you before, and to keep her in the loop about whether you get better.

WHEN YOU HAVE Follow-up questions about symptoms or treatments from a recent visit
WHAT TO DO Call. Subtleties are best addressed voice-to-voice and can sometimes be answered more quickly by the office nurse.

WHEN YOU HAVE Multiple or unusual symptoms
WHAT TO DO Make an appointment. Anything out of the ordinary requires in-person communication and examination.

HOW TO BE A GREAT PATIENT

Medicine is a two-way street. You want to like your physician—and you want him or her to like *you*—and therefore be invested in your health. We asked doctors for insight about what motivates—and frustrates—them when dealing with patients. Here's an Rx to get on their good side:

BE PREPARED “The best care is delivered with the most complete information available,” Dr. Stream says. If you have a special condition like diabetes and are supposed to monitor your blood sugar, bring the readings to your doctor visit. Ditto for lab work requested on previous visits.

FORGOT TO ASK SOMETHING? Don't put off that call. “Patients often have questions after they leave the exam room. It's easier for the physician to give you an answer while your visit is still fresh in her mind,” says S. Hughes Melton, M.D., a family physician in Lebanon, Virginia. “Waiting even a day or two means your physician will have to review his or her notes, and all that takes time.” And, if you wait until your next appointment you may be putting your health in jeopardy.

SAY WHAT YOU THINK The days of “doctor knows best” are long over. “Patients know their bodies—they know what a big deal is, like pain in the leg they haven't had before,” Dr. Stanton says. “Patients who stand up for themselves get better care.”

BE NICE! Most workplaces can get gossipy. The doctor's office is no exception, and if you complain loudly and, well, rudely, the office will notice. Try a humanistic approach—“I'm going on vacation; would you mind calling in a refill?”—instead of being pushy.