

Talking to your doctor

The doctor/patient relationship has changed. We take a look at how you can work in partnership to improve your healthcare...

Visiting your doctor can make you nervous, particularly if you're not used to seeing or talking to many people and your social confidence is low. The patient/doctor relationship is an important one and you

"Develop a good two-way relationship, working together for better, more efficient healthcare!"

can usually build up a good one with your own GP. However when it comes to talking to hospital consultants you may find you become more nervous and leave the consultation room having forgotten to ask the questions you've been waiting months to get answers to!

More and more people are taking an active role in their own healthcare and the doctor/patient relationship has changed over the years to become more of an equal partnership. And like all partnerships, good communication is at the heart of their success.

Different people will look for, and need, different

things from their doctor. Some of us like a straight forward, unemotional description of our illness and to be given treatment options we can discuss. Others prefer a good, friendly bedside manner and some

prefer not to know any details at all. It very much depends on your personal preferences, so the first step is to find a GP who fulfils those personal needs. And, of course, one you are comfortable talking to. You should have full confidence in their ability and feel you can trust their judgement.

Getting it right

There's no 'right' way to talk to your doctor, it depends on what you want to get out of it and what works for you. As in all good relationships this has to work both ways, so if your doctor is a poor communicator with an unfeeling bedside manner

then you might feel happier finding another.

Even if you know your GP well you can still forget to ask that all important question. Surgeries are busy places milling with people, phones ringing and other distractants, so it's easy for important issues to slip out of your mind as you wait.

The waiting time is another important consideration when choosing a GP. You'll often find that the doctors who allow you to talk overrun their appointment times. They will inevitably have longer waiting times once you're at the surgery, whilst others will see you at your designated appointment time. That's a decision only you can make, but you can help to make the system more efficient by following some of our tips.

Before you visit your doctor take a little time to think through what you want to achieve from your visit. Do you simply want reassurance that you are doing things the right way, or do you want

answers and a diagnosis for the symptoms you have? Perhaps you'd like to discuss being referred to a hospital based specialist, or a physiotherapist for example?

Try to clarify your thoughts in your own mind and then jot down some reminders and questions on a notepad before your visit. List them in order of priority to make it easier and less confusing during your consultation. Remember your doctor won't know what you want to achieve from your visit unless you tell him/her. Doctors might be experts in diagnosing medical conditions, but that doesn't make them mind readers!

Make a few notes

If you're suffering from a number of symptoms you should write them down on your list and make a note of when they're at their best and at their worst. Have you noticed anything that makes them worse or is there something that improves them? For example, if you have pain, does it get worse as the day goes on, or is it worse first thing in the morning? Does applying a heat pad make it better?

It's also advisable to take along a list of any medicines, including vitamins or herbal remedies, that you're currently taking. Your doctor will have a list of medications prescribed on your notes, but for various reasons, this could differ from what you

actually take, particularly if you haven't seen him for a while. Sometimes over the counter treatments and herbal remedies can react with conventional medicines, so your doctor needs to know about them, too.

This preparation will save time on the day of your visit and will ensure you don't forget a vital piece of

"If you don't ask questions your doctor will assume you are OK with what he's told you!"

information. It will help you to get the most out of your visit, but also help your doctor to keep to his appointment times. It's the start of developing a good two-way relationship where you're working together for better, more efficient healthcare.

Determining a diagnosis is often a case of piecing together a jigsaw of symptoms and test results, so the more information you can give your doctor the better. It's vital at this stage to impress on you the importance of accuracy and honesty, even if this is embarrassing. Your doctor needs to know what is actually going on not what you think he wants to hear. Don't withhold information either – the more clues you can give your doctor the more he has to go on, in making a diagnosis. If you've been feeling depressed or low it's important you tell your doctor as this will have implications for your

treatment. Your doctor can then advise you on the best ways to manage these feelings as part of a comprehensive, holistic treatment plan, which will benefit you more.

All in the preparation

On the day of your appointment you'll save even more time by dressing

appropriately. If you think you're going to need a physical examination then wear clothes that are easily removable – saving time here will allow you more time for talking and again help your doctor to not overrun his time slots.

In general, the more informed you are about your condition the better and more effectively you'll be able to manage it. It will also help you to better understand what your doctor is saying and introduce you to some of the medical terms that may apply to your condition. We do however accept that there are some people who just prefer not to know the details. That's a personal choice. Either way you need to tell your doctor and not be afraid to ask questions.

If you're one of the many millions of people who surf the internet armed with your list of symptoms before you visit your GP don't go into his office thinking you know

more than he/she does. Tell him that you've been researching your condition and that there are a few questions you'd like to ask him, or you'd like explained or clarified.

As many of you have already discovered, searching the internet for symptoms can be frightening as it often comes up with a host of potential but scary possibilities. However, having some knowledge can

"Having some knowledge can enable you to ask more probing and informative questions."

enable you to ask more probing and informative questions, so it's a good idea to do a bit of exploring. You'll find too, that every surgery has a number of free advice leaflets available. These cover a host of conditions and contact numbers for support groups and helplines. So whilst you're waiting for your appointment, spend your time constructively by browsing through these.

Ask a friend

It can be hard to remember instructions and explanations if you feel anxious or ill, so take your notebook into the consultation. This will enable you to jot down any information your doctor gives. Remember, too, that you can take along a member of your family or a trusted friend. You might feel this is the most comforting

option, particularly if you anticipate discussing more serious diagnoses and treatment plans.

It's important to understand your diagnosis so it's crucial to ask questions. Don't worry that your doctor will think the questions strange. Most doctors have already heard (and seen) most things! It's also a good idea to know a bit more about any tests and treatments your doctor may

recommend. Ask about the range of treatment options for your condition and, if appropriate, arrange to revisit your doctor when you've had a little time to consider all the options properly. If you have a lot of questions and options to consider, then ask the receptionist about booking a double appointment time to ensure your doctor doesn't run late for his next patient. If you feel you need a longer time to talk to someone knowledgeable, then discuss this with your doctor and arrange a time when this can be done. Remember if you don't ask questions your doctor will, quite reasonably, assume that you are quite comfortable with what he's told you.

In some instances you may need to ask for written instructions, but try to remember that your doctor is

a busy person, so make every effort to make your queries relevant and to the point. He has a limited time in which to give you the best treatment, so it won't help if you ramble around the subject. Try to keep to the point – your list will help you to do this.

As we said before a successful relationship is a two way affair so if you don't understand your doctor's answers ask him to repeat or explain them in simpler terms. Your relationship should be one of sharing information as a two way process. Similarly your doctor won't know how effective a treatment is, or whether you've understood his explanations and instructions unless you tell him.

Take control

It's important to remember that if you come away from your doctor's appointment dissatisfied, try not to let this get you down. Don't dwell on it, particularly if your relationship is usually good. It's inevitable that you'll have a few frustrating visits from time to time. If they are few and far between accept them as part of life. If however you're more dissatisfied than pleased, then discuss your worries with your doctor. If this doesn't resolve the issue think seriously about asking to see someone else. It's much easier to do this these days as most GPs see each others' patients within their

own practice. Don't forget that nurses and other healthcare workers are also valuable sources of information and you might feel more comfortable talking to them.

Do your bit!

Your doctor or healthcare worker's advice is totally useless if you don't carry it out. Only you can take responsibility for this. If you have genuine problems with

the advice then it's important to go back to your doctor to tell him. Don't just sit and hope things will go away by themselves. They won't.

The guidelines we've discussed in this article apply whether you're talking to a doctor at a community based surgery or as a hospital inpatient. As an inpatient you'll need to talk to different doctors and may feel more vulnerable, so your little list will be even more

useful. If it makes you more comfortable get a relative or friend to help you out.

Get the best

Taking the time to build up a good relationship with your doctor and other members of a healthcare team will go a long way to ensuring you get the best and most effective treatment available.

The box below contains some suggestions for questions to ask your doctor.

Talking to your doctor

If you find yourself stuck for words, or too nervous to remember the questions you'd like to ask your doctor, then it's a good idea to take in a notepad and pencil. Understanding your diagnosis and treatment will help you to manage it more effectively, so it's important you ask the right questions and make sure you understand the answers. Below are some questions you might like to ask...

- *What is my diagnosis?*
- *Can it be treated and what would you recommend?*
- *What are my treatment options?*
- *What can I expect in the future?*
- *When will you know the results of my tests?*
- *Would you explain the results of my tests?*
- *What does the medication do?*
- *What can I expect from my new medicine?*
- *Are there any risks associated with the treatment?*
- *Are there any risks or side effects associated with the medication?*
- *Do you recommend I take advice on exercise or diet – can you suggest someone to talk to?*
- *Do you recommend making any lifestyle changes?*
- *Will I need an operation – what will that entail?*
- *What sort of waiting times should I expect – is there somewhere else I can go with shorter waiting times?*
- *How can I best prepare for my operation?*
- *Is it worth having a private consultation – if so, what are the approximate costs and drawbacks?*
- *What will happen if my condition goes untreated?*