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Sue Ann Says: How to Talk with Your Health Care Provider

I can't tell you how many times I've spoken with women about a visit they had with their health care provider only to find out how disappointed they were with their experience. "My doctor was too rushed," or "I didn't understand what they were saying," are often the comments I hear. Here's the thing...YOU need to take control of your own health care experience by making sure you're communicating effectively with your doctor, physician's assistant, specialist, lab technician, or whoever it is you're dealing with.

Building a good relationship is critical in making sure that you get the care you need and the care that you want. To do so, you're going to want to communicate effectively and that includes asking the right questions and maximizing the time you have with your provider. Remember, doctors and other health care providers are busy people, but the appointment time you scheduled is your time and you should use it wisely.

Jennifer Frank, MD, FAAFP, is a family physician in private practice at ThedaCare in Neenah, WI and she shared these tips on how to establish a great back-and-forth with your doctor.

Get Ready for the Visit

The first step is to figure out why you are going to the doctor. Is it for an annual check-up, to get a diagnosis, for a medication, or to figure out why something isn't going right? Maybe you're just trying to establish care with a new doctor. Whatever the reason, don't walk into that office unprepared!

What to Bring with You to the Doctor's Office

1. All of your medications in the bottles. Include over-the-counter medications that you take weekly (or more often).
2. Old medical records from previous doctors, including things like previous mammograms or EKGs.
3. A list of what you want to accomplish at the visit.
4. A list of any questions or concerns you have.
5. Your immunization record.
6. A friend, spouse, or family member if you anticipate that the visit will bring up complex or difficult issues. Someone else being present can help remind you to ask all the questions you wanted to ask and can help you remember what the doctor said when you get home.

Identify Your Agenda

Most of the time, the doctor has an idea of what he or she wants to accomplish during the office visit based on the "reason for visit" noted at the time you made your appointment. So, if you have more you want to discuss, make sure that everyone from the receptionist to the nurse to the doctor knows what is on your agenda.

Make a List

Write down the top 3 things you want to discuss plus any others (if there is extra time) before you get to the exam room. This way you will have all the information you need at the time of your visit. Maybe you have a question about something you read in the paper - bring the article along. If you want to know something specific about your medication - bring the bottle along. You get the idea.

Ask for the Time You Need

Expecting too much from the limited amount of time allotted for your office visit is another way to sabotage a successful doctor's appointment. In general, a 15 minute visit is about enough time to address one or at the most two concerns. Make sure to let the receptionist know **everything** you want to discuss at the visit. This way, enough time can be scheduled to make sure you get a chance to get to everything on your list.

Be Honest

Let's be honest...some of the things you talk about in the doctor's office are downright embarrassing. Hemorrhoids or a rash "down there", or a drinking problem are all things that can be hard to discuss with your doctor. However, there is *nothing* doctors haven't heard. And I do mean nothing. So, feel free to spill all the gory details about whatever it is that is concerning you. It is the best and fastest way to get better.

Be Patient

It is understandable that after you have suffered with some type of ailment for weeks, months, or even years, you want an answer **today**. But be patient; usually it will take some time for the doctor to make a diagnosis (maybe after getting a lab, x-ray, or other test) and to formulate a treatment plan. It is also important to give the treatment (whether that is physical therapy or a medication) time to work.

Make Sure You Understand

It is hard to remember what the doctor said even 15 minutes after you have left the office. A lot of doctors are great at explaining things and writing them down for patients, but some go too quickly through complex information. If you need to remember more than one thing, it is usually best to write everything down. One approach to making sure you understand what is going on at a doctor's visit is to write down the answers to 3 questions:

1. *What is my main problem?*
2. *What do I need to do?*
3. *Why is it important for me to do this?*

Tell the Doctor about Barriers

This is an often over-looked part of the visit. If you can't read or can't read well, let your doctor know. You may do better by watching a video or getting one-on-one nursing teaching than by reading a pamphlet. If you can't afford your medication, let your doctor know. If you are not willing to engage in lifestyle change (losing weight, quitting smoking, etc.), let your doctor know. That way he or she can come up with Plan B to get your chronic diseases under better control.

Follow Up as Directed

If your doctor asks you to come back in 3 months to get that little spot on your arm checked, make sure to do it. If you are not any better after one month on the medication the doctor started, follow up. This is the only way to make sure that you get the care you need, that things don't get worse, and that if the first remedy doesn't work, you move quickly to the next.

Be the Coach

You are in charge of your health care team. Make sure that you act as the coach. Get input from and advice from your doctor, but take an active role in managing your health care. Do not be a passive bench-warmer as your health care is decided for you.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman...

Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, and early detection; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.