

# Making the Most of Your Visit with the Doctor

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We hope this booklet will help you make the most of your visit to the doctor's office. It will help you

1. decide when you need to see the doctor
2. get ready for your appointment
3. give the doctor all the information he or she needs
4. get all the information you need
5. know what you need to do after the appointment.



It is a good idea to write some things down to help you remember them when you visit the doctor. Writing things down is just one way to remember things. Some people find it easier to remember things if they draw a picture of it. Other people like to talk about it with another person. You could even talk into a tape recorder then take the tape recorder to your appointment. Everybody learns and remembers in different ways, so use whatever works best for you.

## When do you need to see the doctor?

Sometimes you need to see the doctor because you are sick. Sometimes you just need a check-up. If you are sick, you may need to see the doctor that day or the next. If you need a check-up, you will probably see the doctor within a few weeks.

You may need to see the doctor that day or the next if you have

- a fever over 101° for more than three days
- a stomachache or other pain that keeps you from doing the things you usually do for more than two days
- a very bad stomachache with vomiting
- a change in your bathroom habits (for example, not having a bowel movement — a bm — or having a lot of loose bowel movements) for more than a few days
- a bad cut that is very deep
- a cut or sore that looks red and puffy and that feels hot and painful when you touch it
- noticed that you feel very dizzy or sleepy all the time

- more seizures than usual or seizures that are different from usual
- a rash so bad that it causes a sore
- a very bad headache
- problems catching your breath.



Things like these often mean you need to see the doctor right away.

If you have been feeling different from how you usually feel and it bothers you, but you are not so sick or in pain that you cannot do the things you usually do, you can usually wait a few weeks to see the doctor. Some things that might mean you need to see the doctor in the next few weeks are having headaches, stomachaches, or heartburn more than usual or having a change in your mood or your behavior that you do not understand.

If you are not sure whether you need to see the doctor right away or if it can wait a few weeks, you can ask when you call the doctor's office to make the appointment.

## Calling the doctor's office

Sometimes it is a good idea to make a few notes before you call the doctor's office. Some things to say when you call for an appointment are:



- why you need to see the doctor
- when you need to see the doctor (if you are not sure, tell the nurse what made you decide you needed to see the doctor. The nurse can tell you if you need to see the doctor right away.)
- that you need a longer appointment (for example, 30 minutes) if you need extra time to communicate
- can you do anything until time for your appointment that will help you feel better?
- should you bring anything with you?

Write down the date and time of your appointment. If you need to bring anything with you, write that down too. Tell somebody else everything the nurse said so they can help you remember it.

## Getting ready for the appointment

It is a good idea to list important things to tell the doctor. You can make the list by writing it, by telling it to someone else and asking them to write it for you, or by talking into a tape recorder. Tell exactly what you have been feeling, how often you feel it, and how long it has been going on. List what makes it feel better or worse and whether you have ever had this feeling before.

For example, if you have been waking up during the night because of heartburn, list it. Also list whether you get heartburn if you eat or don't eat close to bedtime, when you first began waking up with heartburn, and how many nights a week it happens.



It is a good idea to mention everything you can think of, even if it does not seem important. Sometimes little details can give the doctor clues to what is making you feel bad. Here are a few things that can give the doctor clues:

1. Have your bathroom habits changed lately? (For example, have you been waking up during the night to use the bathroom more than you used to?)
2. Have your moods or energy levels changed lately? (For example, have you been feeling irritable? Very tired? Sad? Nervous for no reason?)
3. Have you been sleeping more or less than usual lately? Do you wake up during the night and have trouble falling back asleep?
4. Do you have a medical condition that has changed lately? (For example, if you have seizures, have your seizures been different lately? Have you had more than usual? Do they last longer than usual?)
5. Have you been eating more or less than usual lately?
6. Have you had other changes in your life or your daily activities? (For example, have you changed jobs, where you live, or whom you live with?)
7. Have you changed the medicine you take lately?

Bring these notes with you when you visit the doctor. Also bring your insurance card and your personal medical records. Your personal medical records should have:

- Your name and address
- Who to contact if there is an emergency
- A list of the medications you take and how much you take each day
- A list of any allergies you have, including allergies to medications
- A list of your medical conditions
- A list of your immunizations (the shots you've had to help you stay healthy)
- A list of any past illnesses or surgeries
- Any special instructions the doctor might need to know to take care of you.

Check to make sure all the information is up to date. If the nurse told you to bring anything with you when you made the appointment, bring that too.

If you know something bothers you about going to the doctor's office, spend some time thinking about things you can do to help you handle it.

For example, some people get nervous in a crowded waiting room.

You could ask the nurse to let you wait in an exam room instead. Or you could close your eyes and imagine you're in your favorite place, like by a mountain stream.

Other people don't like needles. One way to help is to look away and blow out very hard when the nurse gives you a shot.



These are just two things that bother some people about going to the doctor. There may be something else that bothers you. If it makes you nervous, it probably makes other people nervous too. If you are having a hard time thinking of ways to help you handle whatever bothers you, you can talk to someone else about it. They might have some ideas that could help. If you can't think of anything before your appointment, you can talk about it with your doctor. The doctor may know of ways to help.

## At the doctor's appointment

Always plan to get to the doctor's office at least 15 minutes before your appointment time. You can look over your notes if you have to wait for the doctor.

During the visit, ask the doctor to explain anything you do not understand. You can ask what the doctor is doing while he or she is examining you, and why. It is important to understand everything the doctor says, especially if you need to take a new medicine. Here are some questions to ask if the doctor wants you to take a new medicine:

- What does this medicine treat?
- How long until the medicine makes me feel better?
- How will I know it is working?
- What should I do if it does not seem to be working by the time you said it would?
- How long do I take the medicine?
- How much to I take each day, and when?
- The medicine should make me feel better; what should I do if I start to feel worse?
- What should I do if I forget to take my medicine?



- Will this medicine affect other medicines I take?
- Do I need to be careful about what I eat and drink while I'm taking this medicine?
- Will this medicine make me feel different? (For example, some medicines can make you feel sleepy.)
- If the medicine makes me feel different and I don't like the way it makes me feel, can we try another medicine?
- Is this medicine a pill or a liquid? (If you have trouble swallowing pills, you can ask if the medicine comes as a liquid.)
- Is there something I can do to feel better besides taking medicine?

You might need to see your doctor more often while you are taking some medicines; sometimes the doctor needs to test your blood to make sure you are taking the right amount of medicine to keep you healthy. Be sure you ask the doctor to explain everything you need to know about your new medicine.



If you went to see the doctor because you were sick, you might want to ask the doctor when you can go back to work or school and how you can make sure other people don't catch your illness from you.

Sometimes the doctor needs to run some tests or let you see another doctor before he or she can figure out why you feel bad. Be sure you understand what the doctor needs you to do and why.

Before you leave your appointment, ask the doctor to write down everything he or she told you. Look at what he or she writes to make sure you understand it. If you need to have tests or to see another doctor, be sure the doctor writes down what you need to do and when you need to do it. If you need tests, ask the doctor when he or she will call you to talk about the results.

Before you leave the doctor's office, be sure to ask him or her to update your personal medical record. If you need to make another appointment, do it before you leave the office. Be sure to write down the day and time of the appointment.

## After your doctor's appointment

After you get home from the doctor's appointment, read through what the doctor wrote down or listen to someone you trust as they read it to you. It is a good idea to talk to someone about what happened at your doctor's appointment. Sometimes explaining something to someone else is the best way to make sure you understand it.

If the doctor asked you to take a new medicine, pay attention over the next few days to how you are feeling. If you are not feeling better by the time the doctor said you would, or if you start to feel worse, call the doctor's office to see what you should do.

If you had tests run or you had to see another doctor, write the date you are supposed to hear from your doctor on your calendar. If you have not heard from your doctor within a few days of that date, call the doctor's office to follow up.



## Checklist

Here are a few things you should do before you visit the doctor. Get a piece of paper and a pencil, your tape recorder, or ask someone to help you. Then answer these questions to make sure you're ready for your appointment.

1. Have you made notes on why you are seeing the doctor?
2. Do the notes tell how long it has been going on and how often it happens?
3. Do the notes tell what makes it better or worse?
4. Have you listed any other things to mention to the doctor (for example, changes in your life or in your habits)?
5. Is your insurance card ready to take with you?

6. Is your personal medical history up to date and ready to take with you?

7. If your doctor has asked you to make this appointment to see another doctor, do you have a letter of referral from your doctor? Is it ready to take with you?

8. Do you have a list of your medications ready to take with you?

9. When is your appointment?

10. What time will you have to leave to get to your appointment at least 15 minutes early? (Remember to allow time for traffic and parking.)

If you need more copies of this booklet, please contact



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