

Talking With Your Doctor ... and other Healthcare Professionals



By

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Modified, with permission, for a project of the
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Care Communication

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Preface

Dear Patient,

I have written this booklet to help patients get the most out of their time with doctors. It is the result of years of research with patients and doctors. I can assure you that most doctors are very happy when their patients

- Are prepared for their visit.
- State their concerns clearly and honestly.
- Provide a complete description of their medical condition.
- Ask questions about their illness and its treatment.
- Express problems with prescribed treatments.

My sincere hope is that this booklet will help you to do all of these and more.

In

Peace and Good Health,

DJC

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The research upon which this booklet is based and the setting for which it was meant to be used is a visit with your Family Doctor or GP.

However, the basic principles and suggestions are useful in other settings, too. They are good communication skills and can help your visit with any health care professional.

UBC Division of Health Care
Communication & Patient Voices
Network

Introduction

There are good reasons why patients should be effective communicators:

- ◆ Doctors' appointments are usually limited to less than 10 minutes, so it's important for patients to be prepared and organized.
- ◆ The doctor's ability to determine what is wrong and how to treat it depends almost entirely on the communication between the doctor and patient.
- ◆ Science has provided many wonderful medications and tests. But the doctor's decision to order a test or prescribe a medication depends on what information is provided by the patient.

In general, effective patient communication involves **Presenting** detailed information about how you are feeling.

Asking questions if desired information is not provided.

Checking your understanding of information that is given to you.

Expressing any concerns about the recommended treatment.

Each section of this booklet is devoted to one of these communication skills. There are points where you may want to make notes. So, you might have a piece of paper and a pen handy.

Presenting Detailed Information About How You Are Feeling

It is a good idea to think about what you want to accomplish *before* the actual visit with your doctor. For example, patients should be clear about the reasons for their visit and be able to state them right away. On a separate piece of paper, list the concerns you want to discuss with your doctor. Start with the topic that is most important to you. *Please do this now, before continuing with the rest of the booklet.*

Are any of the concerns you listed **new** medical conditions or **changes** in the way you are feeling since your last visit? If none are, you might skip to the section "Tips About Medications" on page 4.

It is especially important for you to think about, and even write down, the symptoms for any **new** or **changed** medical condition. The following points may help you to describe your condition:

- ◆ Do you experience pain? If so, where?
 - Is the pain constant, or does it come and go?
 - Is it a sharp pain or an ache?
- ◆ When did you first experience these symptoms?

- ◆ How often and when do you experience the symptoms? For example, before or after eating, when you get up in the morning, only after exercise?
- ◆ How long do the symptoms last (for example: seconds? minutes? days?).
- ◆ Does your discomfort increase with certain activity? If so, what activities?
- ◆ Have you taken any prescribed or over-the-counter medication for the problem? If so, what have you taken? Did you feel better? How did you take the medication, for example, how much and how often?
- ◆ Have you used other therapies for the problem, such as vitamins, massages, acupuncture, or physical therapy? If so, what and with what result?
- ◆ Does anything you do help this condition (for example: eating or not eating certain foods? doing or avoiding certain activity?) If so, what?
- ◆ Have you seen a doctor before about this condition? If so, when did you see the doctor? What was his/her name? How was the condition treated? Did you feel better?
- ◆ Are any of your symptoms related to problems, concerns or stress about events in your personal life at home, work or elsewhere? If so, please share your thoughts about these matters with

your doctor. They may be important to your condition and how to treat it.

- ◆ Are you concerned that your symptoms may be a sign of a particular illness like cancer, heart disease or diabetes? If so, be sure to express this to the doctor and state the reasons why you are concerned.

Tips About Medications

- ◆ It is important for you to tell your doctor what medications you are taking, including those prescribed by other doctors and non-prescription vitamins, minerals and herbs. Your doctor may not remember all of the medications you are taking, even if he/she prescribed them.
- ◆ Bring all of your medications with you to the appointment. Or make a list of them, indicating the name, dosage, and how you take each medication (for example: Aspirin, two 250 mg tablets, three times a day with food).

What Do You Expect From The Visit?

At the moment, it may be difficult for you to state exactly what you expect the doctor to do about your medical condition. However, it may be helpful to you later on if you give some thought to this now. Write down any thoughts you have about what you think the

doctor might do for you, (for example: prescribe a medication; order a test; recommend a specialist).

Asking Questions

Thinking about questions to ask the doctor *before* the appointment will help you to decide what information is important for you to get during your visit. The following pages contain sample questions about topics that may be of interest to you. Write down any of the sample questions you want to ask.

1. Sample Questions About Diagnosis and Prognosis

- ◆ What is the medical condition called?
- ◆ Why do I have this medical problem?
- ◆ How serious is the medical condition?
Can I expect complete recovery or will it remain the same or get worse?
- ◆ Will this condition affect my normal activities? If so, how?
- ◆ How long will I have to follow the treatment for this condition?
- ◆ How will I know if the condition is improving or getting worse?
- ◆ Where can I find more information about the medical condition?
- ◆ Are there support groups for this condition? If so, where may I contact them?

Are there other questions or topics you want to discuss about diagnosis or prognosis that are not listed here?

2. Sample Questions about Tests or Procedures

If tests or procedures are ordered, you may want to ask questions like these:

- ◆ What is the purpose of the test/procedure? What will it tell us?
- ◆ Are there any risks in doing the test / procedure?
- ◆ What does the test/procedure involve?
For example:
 - Will it be painful?
 - How long does it take?
 - Will I be awake or asleep?
 - Do I need to bring someone with me?
 - Does it matter what I eat or drink?
 - Do I need to stop taking medications?
 - Who does the test/procedure?
 - How is it done, what steps are involved?
 - Where is it done?
 - Who schedules the test/procedure?
 - Is it covered by my insurance?

Are there other questions or topics you want to discuss about tests/procedures that are not listed here?

3. Sample Questions About Medications

Often the treatment for a medical condition involves taking medication of some kind. Below are sample questions you may want to ask about prescribed or over-the-counter medications, including vitamins and herbs.

- ◆ What is the name of the medication?
- ◆ Why am I taking it? What does it do?
- ◆ Does it have any side effects?
- ◆ Will it interact with other medicines, vitamins or herbs I am taking?
- ◆ How will I recognize negative reactions or effects? What should I do if I experience any of these?
- ◆ Are there other choices? Is there a generic?
- ◆ Do you have samples that I can try?
[Really, it's OK to ask this!]
- ◆ Are there ways to treat my condition without medication?
- ◆ What will happen if I don't take the medicine?
- ◆ How much better will I feel after taking the medicine?
- ◆ How long until I feel better taking this medicine?
- ◆ How should I take it? How often should I take it?
- ◆ How long will I need to take it?
- ◆ What should I do if I miss a dose?

Are there other questions or topics you want to discuss about medications that are not listed here?

4. Sample Questions About Other Treatments

The following are sample questions you may want to ask about treatments other than medications, such as a diet, exercise program, or physical therapy.

- ◆ Why should I do it? What will it do?
- ◆ How should I do it?
- ◆ How often shall I do it?
- ◆ How long will I need to do it?
- ◆ What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing it?
- ◆ When will I see results?
- ◆ How will I recognize negative reactions or effects?
- ◆ Are there risks?
- ◆ What will happen if I don't do it?
- ◆ Are there other choices?

Be sure to write down any additional topics or questions you might want to discuss about possible treatments.

Checking Your Understanding of Information the Doctor Gives You

It is a good idea to check your understanding of information the doctor gives you, such as directions for taking a medication. There are three ways you can do this:

- ◆ Ask the doctor to repeat or clarify information that is unclear.

- ◆ Repeat aloud what the doctor just said.
- ◆ Summarize your understanding of what the doctor just said.

Sometimes patients are a little shy about checking their understanding, but doing so is very important. It shows the doctor that you are concerned about getting complete and correct information. Also, you are more likely to remember the information *if you summarize in your own words what the doctor has told you.*

Don't hesitate to ask the doctor to spell medical terms, draw a picture or write down information for you. If you are shy about checking on information the doctor gives you, consider asking him/her for permission to tape record the visit, or ask someone to accompany you to the appointment.

Expressing Concerns About the Recommended Treatment

Sometimes patients experience problems following the treatment a doctor prescribes. For example, medications may have side effects that interfere with activities patients enjoy. Often when patients experience such difficulties they either change the prescribed treatment, or stop following it entirely.

Unfortunately, even if there are good reasons for changing or stopping a treatment, patients can unknowingly hurt themselves doing so. *The solution to this dilemma is to be **honest** with your doctor in*

expressing concerns about the treatment. Don't hesitate to

- ◆ Explain how you are following the treatment (partially or not at all), and your reasons for doing so.
- ◆ Express your willingness to work with the doctor to find a more agreeable treatment or to change the treatment to better meet your needs.

At this time, please write down concerns you have about any of the treatments that have been prescribed for you, what you would like to change, and why.

Summary: The **PACE** System

Remember to stay on **PACE** in communicating with your doctor by

- ◆ **PRESENTING** detailed information.
- ◆ **ASKING** questions.
- ◆ **CHECKING** on your understanding of information given to you.
- ◆ **EXPRESSING** any concerns you have about the treatment.

In addition to these **PACE** tips, you may find the following recommendations helpful.

Tips About Making An Appointment

Your stated reason for making an appointment determines how much time the nurse or receptionist sets aside in the doctor's schedule for your visit.

- ◆ To make sure enough time is set aside for your needs, be as open and honest as possible about the reason for your visit.
- ◆ If you think extra time will be needed for your visit, let the receptionist know that when you make the appointment.
- ◆ If you are concerned about how long you might wait to see the doctor, try making your appointment for the first time slot in the morning, or the first time slot after lunch. Also, on the day of your appointment, call the doctor's office before leaving your home and ask if he or she is on schedule.

Tips About Medical Records

- ◆ It is important for your primary care doctor (family doctor or GP) to have up-to-date information on all tests and procedures done by other doctors since your last visit.
- ◆ Always ask other doctors to send your primary care doctor a copy of any test results or procedure reports.
- ◆ Always ask doctors for a personal copy of any test results or procedure reports. Bring these personal copies with you if you expect to discuss the results with your doctor.