

How to Talk with your Doctor

The Pharmacy Corner

Communication Skills for Medical Consumers



As more and more of us take active roles in our health care, we're finding that it's not always easy to communicate with our primary healthcare providers — our doctors. Often, we feel rushed or overwhelmed, and sometimes we're confused by unfamiliar medical terms. The following tips can help you talk to your doctor more effectively and help your doctor listen to you.

You're the Customer

Your doctor is your paid medical consultant and you are the client. You are paying for your doctor's time and expertise so don't allow yourself to be rushed or interrupted. If you do, you're apt to feel short-changed and may even leave the office without having your questions answered to your satisfaction.

Write it Down

Before seeing your doctor, write down a list of your primary complaints, such as "I've had a bad cough for two weeks," and other concerns like "My throat is sore and I have a post-nasal drip." Then, list your own observations; for instance "I haven't had a fever. Commercial cough syrups don't seem to help. I

cough most when I'm doing yardwork" and so on. If your doctor should interrupt you, simply return to your list and continue until you've covered all your points. You can also bring along a standard list of questions, such as the one provided, to ensure that you understand your doctor's diagnosis and your treatment options. Feel free to add your own questions to this list.

Ask for Explanations

If you are confused by your doctor's "medical talk," ask him or her to repeat your diagnosis in simple, everyday speech. "Serous otitis media" may not mean very much to you, but "ear infection" makes sense. Similarly, if medication is prescribed, be sure you understand your doctor's instructions for use before you leave the office.

Below is a checklist for you to use when visiting your physician:

Ask Your Doctor

About prescriptions:

- Why do I need this medication?
- Is a less expensive generic drug available?

- Are there any side effects?
- How soon should my symptoms improve?
- Are there any special instructions?

About tests:

- What will this test show you?
- How accurate is it?
- How will it affect my treatment?
- Are there any risks or side effects?
- Do I need to do anything special before or after the test?
- How much will it cost?

About treatment and surgery:

- What are the benefits and risks?
- How soon will it improve my condition?
- Are other treatments available?
- Can you refer me to another physician for a second opinion?
- If surgery is needed, can it be done on an outpatient basis?
- If hospitalization is needed, how long will I be there and what will it cost?

List any other concerns you may have: _____

Claim Forms
 Fraud Hot Line
 Health Benefit Plan
 PPO Payment Questions

1-800-433-NALC
 1-800-433-NALC
 1-703-725-1467
 1-800-548-8454

PPO Locator Service
 Prescription Drug Program
 Recorded Benefit Information

1-800-822-8252
 1-800-822-8252
 1-800-833-NALC
 1-800-433-NALC