



Getting the Most Out of Health Care Visits

Health care providers are the most common source of health information so it is important to get the most out of each health care visit. Visits with health care providers are usually brief, packed with information and many health care decisions are made.

Research has shown that people who are organized for their visits, take an active role in their health care decisions, and have good communication with their health care providers tend to be more satisfied with their care and have better results.

What to expect during a health care visit

Knowing the typical structure of the visit will help you make the most of every minute and take part in making important decisions about your health care. Health care providers often use the following steps during a visit.

- Setting the agenda for the visit.
- Asking about your symptoms and concerns.
- Giving you information about your treatment options.
- Understanding your preferences.

- Making healthcare decisions such as a change in medication or further testing needed.
- Ending the visit by reviewing health care decisions made and checking for your concerns.

Not all health care providers will follow all these steps at every visit. Regardless, it is important that you feel comfortable asking questions and expressing your concerns. If you consistently feel like your questions and concerns are not addressed by your health care provider, you may want to find another health care provider that is a better fit for you.

Tips for your health care visit

Remembering the abbreviation **PACT** will help you organize health care visits. PACT stands for **P**repare, **A**sk Questions, **C**reate a Plan, and **T**ake-Away Materials.

P – Prepare: Make getting ready for visit a habit. Being prepared is particularly important for your first visit to a new health care provider.

What to bring:

- Your insurance card, the names of your other health care providers, the phone number of your pharmacy.

- A list of medications and supplements you are currently taking and dosage, including over-the-counter and alternative medicines.
- If you have an Advance Directive make sure that your health care provider has a copy.
- Your glasses, hearing aids or other things to make communication easier.
- If you need special equipment (because of mobility limitations) or more time (because of communication limitations) be sure to let the person who schedules the appointment know.
- A friend or significant other as an extra set of ears. You can also use an audio recorder if you get permission from your health care provider first.
- A brief written description of your health problems and your symptoms. Be prepared to respond to questions your health care provider will ask about your symptoms, including:
 - ◆ What are the symptoms?
 - ◆ When do you experience them? Are they constant?
 - ◆ Do they affect your daily activities? If so, how is your life affected?

Other tips:

- Find out how much time you will have with your health care provider so you can decide on how many questions to ask.
- Most importantly, be on-time by planning to get to your appointment a little early.

A - Ask questions: Your questions will inform your decisions and help your health care provider understand your perspective. Some suggestions include:

- **Write down** questions to bring to your visit.
- Place your questions in order of importance so the things that matter most to you can be dealt with first.
- If you don't understand what your health care provider is saying or the information is going too fast, ask for a repetition or more explanation.
- If you have questions about health information you found in other sources such as the Internet, make sure the information is trustworthy and bring a brief summary and name of the source to your health care provider. See the factsheet on *Getting Trustworthy Health Information from the Internet* to learn more.

Possible questions to ask about medical tests:

- Why is the test being done?
- What steps does the test involve? How should I get ready?
- Are there any dangers or side effects?
- How will I find out the results? How long will it take to get the results?
- What will we know after the test?
- May I have a copy of the test results?

Possible questions to ask about medications:

- What does the medication do?

- What are the benefits of the medication?
- What are the side effects?
- What will happen if I don't take the medication?
- How long will I need to take the medication?
- Will the medication have an interaction with other prescriptions or over-the-counter medications or supplements that I'm taking?

C – Creating a plan: Creating a plan involves making decisions with your health care provider on how to address the issues that are bothering you.

- Let the health care provider know how much you want to be involved in the decisions.
- Understand the decisions that need to be made.
- Be sure you know all of the options that are available to you and the pros and cons of the various options.
- Remember that deferring the decision might be an option.
- Tell the health care provider if you have concerns about the decisions made.
- Make sure you understand the plan.

T -Take-away materials: It is important that you have information to review after you leave the appointment to help you remember what decisions were made. Take-away materials might include:

- A written version of your health care decisions.

- A written follow-up plan, including return visits and appointments with other health care providers.
- Contact information in case you have questions after the visit.
- Brochures, articles, audio and video recordings that provide additional information.
- Recommendations of useful and trustworthy websites.

Resources

The Agency for Health Research and Quality provides a tool that will assist you in building and printing out your question list: <http://www.ahrq.gov/questions/qb/>

Weiss, M. D. (2007). 7 Minutes: How to get the most from your doctor visit. New York: Random House Custom Media.

Quick Tips—When Talking with Your Doctor. AHRQ Publication No. 01-0040a, May 2002. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Rockville, MD. <http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/quicktips/doctalk.htm>.

Authorship

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