

How to Talk to Your Doctor

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"He didn't answer my questions. He dismissed my questions about a new treatment I had read about in the newspaper. He was only interested in giving me pills. I felt like he was trying to hurry me along. I won't go back there again."

That's what the patient said. Yet, when I called the physician, I got quite a different story.

"That patient had a million questions that took more than an hour to answer, but I'm still not sure what he wanted from me. He was so vague. I don't think I could have done anything to satisfy him."

You wonder how both of these people could have been in the same room. But understanding what has happened in this case is the key to knowing how to make the most of your doctor appointments.

You need to be specific about what you expect from the physician. Give the doctor some clue about why you are there. "I haven't been feeling well," isn't enough. Try, "I noticed more weakness on my left side and my fatigue seems worse in the evening." If you want information about medication to relieve your symptoms, ask for it. Make a list of your questions before

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you go to your appointment.

If you want to ask the doctor about an article you have read or a report you have seen on television, present as much information about it as possible. Bring a copy of the article if possible. Make notes on the program, channel, and time of the report. With the volume of medical information available today, it is impossible to know everything that is printed or said about MS. The more information you give your doctor, the more likely you are to receive a useful response.

The time crunch is another factor that can cause frustration on both sides. A physician sets aside a specific amount of time to see you. The doctor's concept and your concept of how much time is needed can be vastly different. If you have a list of fifteen questions and your physician schedules a fifteen-minute visit, you will not feel satisfied. When you make the appointment, let the office staff know you will need more time than usual for the visit. Give the staff the option of lengthening your appointment or scheduling a second time for you. You should be willing to pay for this extra time.

Many patients overlook the emotional aspects of a doctor's visit. I'm not talking about how you feel, but how the doctor feels. Treating patients with multiple sclerosis pushes some emotional buttons for many of us. We identify personally with many of our patients. Some are friends or the same age as our children, and we share the same vulnerability to getting MS as they.

In an ideal situation, doctor and patient are a team in the management of MS. That takes trust on the part of the patient and honesty and humanity on the part of the doctor. The ideal does exist but not everyone will find it.

Recognize this emotional component to your doctor/patient relationship. At its best, this connection can help you and your doctor become partners in managing your health care. At its worst, this aspect can get in the way of defining issues and devising solutions. If you sense your doctor is making suggestions based on values that you do not share, speak up.

For the communication to be effective, both of you must be good listeners. Do not be afraid to ask the physician to explain complicated terms or concepts. If the explanation is too detailed or rapid, say so. Try repeating the doctor's words back to him to make sure you understand. Take notes if necessary.

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