

Getting Ready for a Doctor's Visit

A basic plan can help you get the most out of your medical appointment:

- ✓ **Make a list of your concerns and prioritize them** — Do you have a new symptom you want to ask the doctor about? Do you want to get a flu shot? Are you concerned about how a treatment is affecting your daily life? If you have more than a few items to discuss, put them in order. Start with the ones most important to you.
- ✓ **Plan to update the doctor** — Let your doctor know what has happened to your health since your last visit. If you have been treated in the emergency room or by a specialist, tell the doctor right away. Mention any changes in your appetite, weight, sleep, energy level, vision, or hearing. Also tell the doctor about recent changes in medications you take or their effects on you.
- ✓ **Take information with you** — Bring a list of all your prescription drugs, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal remedies or supplements, including the dose. Or, put them all in a bag and bring them with you to your appointment. Also take your insurance cards, the names and phone numbers of your other doctors, and any medical records your doctor doesn't already have.
- ✓ **Make sure you can see and hear as well as possible** — If you use eyeglasses and/or a hearing aid, wear them at the doctor's visit. Let the doctor and staff know if you have a hard time seeing or hearing. For example, you may want to say: "*My hearing makes it hard to understand everything you're saying. It helps when you speak slowly.*"
- ✓ **Consider bringing a family member or friend** — If you bring a companion to the appointment, tell him or her in advance what you want from your visit and if you'd like some alone time with your doctor. Your companion can remind you what you planned to discuss with the doctor if you forget, take notes during the visit, and help you remember what the doctor said.
- ✓ **Plan for an interpreter if you know you'll need one** — Arrange with your doctor's office for an interpreter before your visit. Make sure the interpreter clearly understands your symptoms and/or condition, so the information is accurately communicated to the doctor. Let the doctor, your interpreter, or the staff know if you do not understand your diagnosis or the treatment instructions.

Remembering What the Doctor Says

No matter what your age, it's easy to forget a lot of what your doctor says. Here are some ideas to help make sure you have all the information you need.

- ✓ **Take notes** — Take along a notepad and something to write with, and jot down the main points, or ask the doctor to write them down for you. If you can't write while the doctor is talking to you, make notes in the waiting room after the visit. Or, bring a tape recorder along, and (with the doctor's permission) record what is said. Recording is especially helpful if you want to share the details of the visit with others.
- ✓ **Make sure you understand** — It is hard to remember a diagnosis or instructions about a treatment that you don't understand. Ask about anything that does not seem clear. For instance, you might say: *"I want to make sure I understand. Could you explain that a little more?"* or *"I'm not familiar with that word. What does it mean?"* Another way to check is to repeat what you think the doctor means in your own words and ask, *"Is this correct?"*
- ✓ **Get written or recorded materials** — Ask if your doctor has any brochures, fact sheets, DVDs, CDs, cassettes, or videotapes about your health conditions or treatments. For example, if your doctor says that your blood pressure is high, he or she may give you brochures explaining what causes high blood pressure and what you can do about it. Ask the doctor to recommend other sources, such as websites, public libraries, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies that may have written or recorded information you can use.
- ✓ **Talk to other members of the healthcare team** — Sometimes the doctor may want you to talk with other health professionals who can help you understand and carry out the decisions about how to manage your condition. Nurses, physician assistants, pharmacists, and occupational or physical therapists may be able to take more time with you than the doctor.
- ✓ **Call or email the doctor** — If you are uncertain about the doctor's instructions after you get home, call the office. A nurse or other staff member can check with the doctor and call you back. You could ask whether the doctor, or other health professional you have talked to, has an email address you can use to send questions.

Keeping Track of Your Medicines

This chart can help you keep track of the different medicines, vitamins and over-the-counter drugs you take. Because your medications may change over time, make a copy of the blank form so you will always have a clean copy to use. Try to bring a completed and updated copy of this form to every doctor appointment.

Date: _____

Name of Drug	What It's For	Date Started	Doctor	Color/ Shape	Dose (How Much/ How Often)	Instructions

Name of Drug	What It's For	Date Started	Doctor	Color/ Shape	Dose (How Much/ How Often)	Instructions

Making Good Use of Your Time During a Doctor's Visit

- ✓ **Be honest** — It is tempting to say what you think the doctor wants to hear, like you have stopped smoking or are eating a more balanced diet. This is natural, but it's not in your best interest. Your doctor needs all the facts to suggest the best treatment for you. For instance, you might say: *"I have been trying to eat fewer sweets, as you recommended, but I am not making much headway."*
- ✓ **Decide what questions are most important** — Pick three or four questions or concerns that you most want to talk about with the doctor. You can tell him or her what they are at the beginning of the appointment, and then discuss each in turn. If you have time, you can then go on to other questions.
- ✓ **Stick to the point** — Although your doctor might like to talk with you at length, there is only a limited amount of time for each patient. To make the best use of your time, give the doctor a brief description of the symptom, when it started, how often it happens, and if it is getting worse or better.
- ✓ **Share your point of view about the visit** — Tell the doctor if you feel rushed, worried, or uncomfortable. If necessary, you can offer to return for a second visit to discuss your concerns more fully. Try to voice your feelings in a positive way. For example, you could say something like: *"I know you have many patients to see, but I'm really worried about this. I'd feel much better if we could talk about it a little more."*
- ✓ **Remember the doctor may not be able to answer all your questions** — Even the best doctor may not have answers to some of your questions. Your doctor may be able to help you find the information or refer you to a specialist. If a doctor regularly brushes off your questions or symptoms as simply a part of aging, think about looking for another doctor.

Questions to Ask During a Medical Appointment

Medical Tests

- ✓ What will the test tell us?
- ✓ What does it involve?
- ✓ How should I get ready?
- ✓ Will insurance pay it? If not, how much will it cost?
- ✓ Are there any dangers or side effects?
- ✓ How and when will I find out the results? Can I get a copy?

Your Diagnosis

- ✓ What may have caused this condition?
- ✓ How long will it last? Is it permanent?
- ✓ How is this condition treated or managed?
- ✓ How will it affect me? What might be the long-term effects?
- ✓ How can I learn more?

Treatment Options

- ✓ What are my treatment choices?
- ✓ What are the risks and benefits?
- ✓ Ask yourself—which treatment is best for me, given my values and circumstances?

Medications

- ✓ When will it start working?
- ✓ What are common side effects?
- ✓ Will I need a refill? How do I arrange that?
- ✓ Should I take it with food? What time of day should I take it?
- ✓ Should I avoid anything while taking it?
- ✓ What if I miss a dose?

Prevention

- ✓ What can I do to prevent a health problem from developing or getting worse?
- ✓ How will changing my habits help?
- ✓ Are there any risks to making this change?
- ✓ Are there support groups or community services that might help me?

Changes to Discuss

Your doctor may want to know about changes in your health and life since your last visit. This chart can help you organize your thoughts. Not all the things on this list will apply to you. Make a copy of the blank list so you will always have a clean copy to use. Then take a minute to think about each of these possible topics. Try to jot down a date for when you first noticed a change and note any additional information that may be helpful for the doctor to know.

Topic	Date	Notes
Your diet, medication, and lifestyle		
Alcohol use		
Appetite changes		
Diet/nutrition		
Medicines		
Tobacco use		
Weight changes		
Your health		
Bone/joint pain or stiffness		
Bowel problems		
Chest pain		
Dizziness or lightheadedness		
Headaches		

Topic	Date	Notes
Hearing changes		
Hospitalizations or recent emergencies		
Shortness of breath		
Skin changes		
Urinary problems or feeling wet		
Vision changes		
Your thoughts and feelings		
Intimacy issues or changes in sexual activity		
Loneliness or feeling isolated		
Memory problems or trouble thinking		
Sadness or feeling down		
Everyday living		
Accidents, injuries, or falls		
Advance directives		
Daily activities		
Driving/transportation/mobility		
Exercise		
Living situation		
Sleep problems or changes in sleep patterns		

Tips for Talking With Your Doctor

Concerns to Discuss

This form can help you organize your concerns, symptoms, or other health matters that you'd like to discuss with your doctor. Make a copy of the blank form so you will always have a clean copy to use. Then, after you make an appointment, take a minute to write down the name of the doctor and the appointment details (the date, time, address). Use the form to make a list of the concerns you want to discuss, starting from most important to least important.

Doctor:

Appt. Date:

Time:

Address:

Phone:

Appointment Details (most important to least important)

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	

Notes

Health and Aging Information Resources

Here is a sampling of resources that may be helpful. You may find more information through the Internet, home medical guides, books and articles available at libraries, national organizations or associations, other institutes within the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and self-help groups.

National Institute on Aging (NIA) Resources

NIA Information Center

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
1-800-222-2225
1-800-222-4225 (TTY)
www.nia.nih.gov/health
www.nia.nih.gov/espanol

NIA has free information in English and Spanish, both online and in print publications. Check out NIA's booklet *Talking With Your Doctor: A Guide for Older People*. Visit NIA's website to find these resources and to sign up for email alerts about new information.

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

1-800-438-4380
www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers

NIA's ADEAR Center offers referrals and free information about Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, including fact sheets and other publications.

NIHSeniorHealth.gov

This website from NIA and the National Library of Medicine, both a part of the National Institutes of Health, is designed specifically for older people. It features a wide variety of popular health topics presented in a simple-to-use, easy-to-read format. It also has short videos and a button to make the type larger.

Go4Life®

www.nia.nih.gov/Go4Life

NIA's online exercise and physical activity campaign, **Go4Life®**, features a sample workout, exercise videos, motivational e-cards, printable tip sheets, success stories, online tracking tools, and more.

Other Federal Government Health Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333
1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)
1-888-232-6348 (TTY)
www.cdc.gov

The CDC has information about health issues in America and abroad, disease and injury prevention, and emergency preparedness.

Eldercare Locator Service

1-800-677-1116 (bilingual)
www.eldercare.gov

The Eldercare Locator is a nationwide, directory assistance service helping older people and caregivers locate local support and resources for older Americans. It is funded by the Administration on Aging.

U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Consumer Health Information
Room 5377, Building 32
10903 New Hampshire Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20993
www.fda.gov/ForConsumers

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration website has information for older people about prescription and over-the-counter medicines, drug safety, and ways to lower medicine costs.

Medicare

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21244-1850
1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)
1-877-486-2048 (TTY)
www.medicare.gov

The Medicare website has information about health and drug plans and explains what is covered by different parts of Medicare.

MedlinePlus

1-888-FIND-NLM (1-888-346-3656)
1-800-735-2258 (TDD)
www.medlineplus.gov

This website from the National Library of Medicine has information about a variety of diseases and conditions, as well as descriptions of medical (“laboratory”) tests.

National Institutes of Health

9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892
1-301-496-4000
1-301-402-9612 (TTY)
www.nih.gov

NIH, the nation’s medical research agency, conducts and supports research on the causes, treatments, and cures for both common and rare diseases.