How to talk to your doctor

When seeking help about something as important as your own or your family's health, it’s normal to feel nervous or less confident than usual. It can help to plan ahead, during and after a visit to a health care loped a set of guidelines to do just that:



Before the visit

Walking in, knowing your needs, and feeling prepared, can go along way towards helping get necessary and relevant information. Try to:

Inform yourself. If you need reliable health information to help in talking with the doctor, try the Canadian Health Network. The CHN offers trustworthy health information from more than 500 organizations across Canada.

- **Write down your concerns.** This will help you to remember all the things you want to cover. If needed, add notes about current medications and any family medical history that may be relevant.
- **Invite a family member or friend.** If it’s alright with the doctor and comfortable for you, it can be beneficial to have someone else along who can take notes, ask questions you may not think of, and help you remember what the doctor says.

During the visit

Use the notes you prepared in advance and try to:

- **Ask your most important questions first.** That way, the doctor can focus proper time on what’s most important to you. Go over your list together and see if you will need a follow-up visit to cover all your concerns.
- **Take notes.** This will help with remembering what the doctor says. If a friend is with you, have them take notes so you can focus on listening and asking questions.
- **Tell the doctor about all your symptoms.** Not just the physical ones, but your thoughts and feelings as well. Depending on the illness or condition, you may need to know more about the pros and cons of different treatments, about how your everyday life may change, or how your family, home or work situations could be affected.
- **Ask for material to take away.** There may be more to know than the doctor can tell you during your visit. Ask for any information you can take away and read. Schedule a follow-up visit to deal with questions that may come up around this information.
- **If you don't understand, say so.** Ask the doctor to explain medical words or repeat things in plain language. Don’t be embarrassed to ask for a sketch or illustration that helps you understand your illness, treatments or tests.
- **Repeat what you think the doctor said.** Use your own words to say what you think you heard. This can clear up confusion, ensure you don't miss important points, and help you remember instructions.
- **Ask for a treatment plan.** If you feel your own notes are not enough, have your doctor write down instructions for you.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for a second opinion.** Your doctor will be happy to have you confirm the results if it makes you feel better about your treatment.

After the visit

Try these tips to help keep relevant information and procedures clear and fresh in your mind for as long as needed:

- **Review notes from the visit.** Make sure they are all legible and clear, especially if someone else wrote them.
- **Keep a journal.** Write down what you learn from your doctor, other people or your own reading. Make a note of symptoms, medications, reactions to treatment, and questions as they occur. Read them over before your next visit.
- **Learn some basic medical terms.** This will help you follow your progress and manage your care.
- **Get more information.** If you are concerned about your results and the options the doctor has presented, find out more before making a decision.
- **Get a second opinion.** Then make another appointment with the first doctor when you have had time to think.

Remember, too, that you have a right to change doctors. If you really feel that you and your doctor do not have good rapport, find another.

The medical world can sometimes feel intimidating and stressful. It’s important to feel prepared and get everything necessary out of your time with medical professionals. Be proactive about your own health and try these ideas to help you make the most of the system and those in it.