

Actively Involved

THE BEST CARE IS SELF-CARE

YOUR DOCTOR IS YOUR PARTNER IN HEALTH CARE

“It is not always easy to feel comfortable around doctors. But research has shown that good communication with your doctor can actually be good for your health.”

You probably have many questions about your disease or condition. The first person to ask is your doctor.

It is fine to seek more information from other sources; in fact, it is important to do so. But consider your doctor your partner in health care—someone who can discuss your situation with you, explain your options, and help you make decisions that are right for you.

It is not always easy to feel comfortable around doctors. But research has shown that good communication with your doctor can actually be good for your health. It can help you to:

- ▶ Feel more satisfied with the care you receive.
- ▶ Have better outcomes (end results), such as reduced pain and better recovery from symptoms.

Being an active member of your health care team also helps to reduce your chances of medical mistakes and helps to ensure that you get high-quality care.

Of course, good communication is a two-way street. Here are some ways to help make the most of the time you spend with your doctor:

Prepare For Your Visit

- ▶ Think about what you want to get out of your appointment. Write down all your questions and concerns.
- ▶ Prepare and bring to your doctor visit a list of all the medicines you take.
- ▶ Consider bringing along a trusted relative or friend. This person can help ask questions, take notes, and help you remember and understand everything once you leave the doctor's office.

Give Information To Your Doctor

- ▶ Do not wait to be asked.
- ▶ Tell your doctor everything he or she needs to know about your health—even the things that might make you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable.
- ▶ Tell your doctor how you are feeling—both physically and emotionally.
- ▶ Tell your doctor if you are feeling depressed or overwhelmed.

Get Information From Your Doctor

- ▶ Ask questions about anything that concerns you. Keep asking until you understand the answers. If you do not, your doctor may think you understand everything that is said.
- ▶ Ask your doctor to draw pictures if that will help you understand something.
- ▶ Take notes.
- ▶ Tape record your doctor visit, if that will be helpful to you. But first ask your doctor if this is okay.
- ▶ Ask your doctor to recommend resources such as Web sites, booklets, or tapes with more information about your disease or condition.

Get Information About Next Steps

- ▶ Get the results of any tests or procedures. Discuss the meaning of these results with your doctor.
- ▶ Make sure you understand what will happen if you need surgery.
- ▶ Talk with your doctor about which hospital is best for your health care needs. **A**

10 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR AFTER A DIAGNOSIS

These 10 basic questions can help you understand your disease or condition, how it might be treated, and what you need to know and do before making treatment decisions.

1. What is the technical name of my disease or condition, and what does it mean in plain language?
2. What is my prognosis (outlook for the future)?
3. How soon do I need to make a decision about treatment?
4. Will I need any additional tests, and if so what kind and when?
5. What are my treatment options?
6. What are the pros and cons of my treatment options?
7. Is there a clinical trial (research study) that is right for me?
8. Now that I have this diagnosis, what changes will I need to make in my daily life?
9. What organizations do you recommend for support and information?
10. What resources (booklets, Web sites, audiotapes, videos, DVDs, etc.) do you recommend for further information?

DO NOT HESITATE TO SEEK A SECOND OPINION

A second opinion is when another doctor examines your medical records and gives his or her views about your condition and how it should be treated.

You might want a second opinion to:

- ▶ Be clear about what you have.
- ▶ Know all of your treatment choices.
- ▶ Have another doctor look at your choices with you.

It is not pushy or rude to want a second opinion. Most doctors will understand that you need more information before making important decisions about your health. Check to see whether your health plan covers a second opinion. In some cases, health plans require a second opinion.



THE DECISION IS YOURS: TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT RISKS AND BENEFITS

It is important to talk to your doctor about the benefits and risks of any medicine, treatment, or surgery you are considering.

Getting that information will help you sort out your choices. It will also help you make a decision that considers your needs and preferences.

Every medicine, treatment, or surgery involves some risk. Even a medicine like aspirin has side effects for some people. However, for many people, the benefit of this widely used pain reliever is greater than the risk of taking it.

The benefits of some medicines or treatments are often clear cut, such as losing weight or getting your blood pressure under control. These benefits also can help your future health by lowering your risk of diabetes or heart disease. Think about both the short- and long-term benefits of medicines and treatments because both are important for maintaining good health.

Balancing benefit and risk is not always easy, depending on the medicine or treatment in question. For example, for most people, the benefit of a medicine to lower blood pressure is probably more important than the risk of becoming tired or dizzy after taking it.

On the other hand, something like surgery to lose weight may be so risky for some patients, such as those over age 65 with underlying illnesses, that any benefit it could give isn't worth it. Even though older patients might have serious health risks due to obesity, they also have a much greater chance of complications or death than younger patients who undergo this surgery.

How should you make decisions about your care when the information about benefits and risks doesn't give a clear answer? First, keep in mind that for many treatment decisions, no perfect answer exists. For example, weight-loss surgery might be a perfectly good option for your 40-year-old cousin but not for your 75-year-old uncle with heart disease.

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Next, recognize that you may have more than one treatment option. For example, if you have high blood pressure, you might be able to take a medicine that has few side effects and gives you the desired result. Or you may be able to control your blood pressure through changes in diet and exercise. Talk to your doctor about the pros and cons of different treatment options so your decision reflects what you want.

Even though everyone should be active in their own health care, not everyone wants to be highly involved in these decisions. Some patients see their doctors as trusted advisors. They are simply not interested in seeking information outside of their doctors' recommendations.

But many other people think of doctors as their partners in medical care and are very involved in making treatment decisions. These patients want to know all of their options. Frequently, these patients want advice from their physicians but prefer to make the final decision on their own.

Regardless of your own preferences or style, it's important to know that benefits and risks are a part of every treatment decision. Asking questions about them will help you and your doctor arrive at a decision about a medicine, treatment, or surgery that is right for you. **A**

TO ASK OR NOT TO ASK

These days, an appointment with your doctor may give you just enough time to cover the basics: reviewing your medical history, discussing the reason for your visit, and finding out if you need follow-up tests or medicines.

But medical appointments usually don't allow much, if any, time for questions. It's hard to ask questions when you're not sure what the problem is or how to express your concern. That's why it's important to be prepared for appointments by thinking of your questions before your doctor's visit, writing them down, and bringing them with you.

Make sure to ask your doctor, "Is this a good time for me to ask questions?" If it's not, ask your doctor how and when a time can be set up. By doing this, you are telling your doctor that you need more information. Patients who ask questions get better quality health care and can get better results.

For tips on building a list of questions for your doctor, visit "Questions are the Answer" at www.ahrq.gov.

The information contained in this medical self-care newsletter can be used to increase your personal awareness of how to manage minor health issues. If you have any questions or concerns about medical issues impacting you or your family, always contact your health care provider.



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Sources:

National Institutes of Health (www.nih.gov), Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (www.ahrq.gov)



ABOUT The Wellness Council Of America (WELCOA)

WELCOA was established as a national not-for-profit organization in the mid 1980s through the efforts of a number of forward-thinking business and health leaders. Today, WELCOA has become one of the most respected resources for workplace wellness in America. With a membership in excess of 4,000 organizations, WELCOA is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of all working Americans. Located in America's heartland, WELCOA makes its national headquarters in one of America's healthiest business communities—Omaha, NE.