

## How To Talk To Your Doctor

How many times have you left your doctor's office without having asked that one important question that had been on your mind for weeks? Or worse, how often do you walk away feeling confused about your diagnosis? Neither of these situations is surprising, considering that most visits with your doctor last only five to ten minutes.

Effectively communicating with your doctor is a two-way street. The better you are at communication, the better your quality of care. First and foremost, write down your main concern and practice describing it. At the first sign of a problem, take notes of when it started; the symptoms; the location of the pain; type of pain -- dull ache or stabbing; whether it is a recurring problem, and if so, how you treated it before; and any changes in your life (stress, medications, food, exercise, etc.).

Also write down your hunches or fears about what is wrong. And, bring along a list of medications you are taking.

Next, be honest. If you haven't been taking a prescribed medication, or if you have a bad habit that may be contributing to your problem, tell your doctor. Also share whether you are getting alternative care, such as acupuncture or chiropractic treatments. The more information your doctor has, the better care you will receive.

You may also want to create a checklist for your visit to ensure getting answers to all of your questions. Write down your temperature, blood pressure, diagnosis (what's wrong), the prognosis (what is expected to happen next) and a self-care policy (what you can do at home). For drugs, tests and treatments, ask:

- What is its name?
- Why is it needed?
- What are the costs and risks?
- Are there alternatives?
- What if I do nothing?
- How do I take the drugs?
- How do I prepare for a test?

At the end of your visit, clarify your next steps. Do you return for another visit? Phone in for results? Are there danger signs to watch for? And finally, feel free to read your notes back to the doctor to ensure you have it right. It's in your and your doctor's best interest to play an active role in your visit because the better you take care of yourself, the less likely you are to become sick again.