

Become a Partner in Your Health Care

Many people go to the doctor ready to just listen and let the doctor take the lead. But the best patient-doctor relationships are partnerships. You and your doctor can work together as a team that includes nurses, physician assistants, pharmacists, and other health care providers to address your medical problems and keep you healthy.

Your first step is to find a main doctor (your *primary doctor* or *primary care doctor*) with whom you feel comfortable talking. Your doctor needs to understand your health concerns and problems. He or she will help you make medical decisions that suit your values and daily habits and will keep in touch with any other specialists you may need. So spend some time finding a doctor you can trust and with whom you can talk openly.

Try drawing up a basic plan to help you make the most of your appointments, whether you're starting with a new doctor or continuing with the one you've seen for years. Make a list in advance of the things you want to discuss. Do you have a new symptom? 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 with the most important ones first.

Good communication is key to good health care. Tell your doctor if you have vision or hearing problems so he or she can accommodate you. Ask for an interpreter if the doctor doesn't speak your language.

Some doctors suggest you put all your prescription drugs, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal remedies or supplements in a bag and bring them with you. You should at least bring a complete list of everything you take. A recent survey found that nearly two thirds of older Americans use some form of *complementary and alternative medicine*—health practices outside the realm of conventional medicine, such as herbal supplements, meditation, homeopathy, and acupuncture (American Association of Retired Persons [AARP] & The National Center for Complementary Medicine [NCCAM] 2007). Less than one third of them, however, discuss these practices with their doctors. This news is a cause for concern because your doctor needs to have a full picture of everything you're doing to manage your health.

During your visit, make sure to ask questions if anything is unclear to you. Bring up any problems or concerns you might have, whether or not the doctor asks about them. Ask about different treatment options. And don't hesitate to tell the doctor if you have concerns about a particular treatment or change in your daily life.

You might also consider bringing a family member or close friend to your appointment with you. Let him or her know in advance what you want from your visit. Your companion can remind you what you planned to discuss with the doctor if you forget or take notes for you and help you remember what the doctor said.

Take an active role in your own health care. Do everything you can to get the best care possible.

Tips for Your Doctor Visit

- Make a list in advance of the things you want to discuss at your appointment.
- If you don't understand something your doctor is saying, ask questions until you do understand.
- Take notes or get a friend or family member to take notes for you.
- Ask your doctor to write down instructions for you.
- Ask your doctor for printed material about your condition or suggestions for where you can get more information.
- Don't forget that other members of your health care team, such as nurses and pharmacists, can be good sources of information. Talk to them, too.

American Association of Retired Persons & the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. (2007, January 18). *What people 50 and older are using and discussing with their physicians: Consumer survey report*. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health.

National Institutes of Health (NIH). (2007, May). Speak up: Become a partner in your health care. *NIH News on Health*. Retrieved July 21, 2010, from <http://newsinhealth.nih.gov>