

Getting the Most from your **Doctor's Visit**

By *Laura Picciano, DO*

Visits to the doctor's office can often be stressful and even emotional expenses. Add to that the ever-changing health care environment and busy offices and it is easy to see how misunderstandings can occur. Many negative situations are avoidable if you do some homework before selecting a practice. If you already have a doctor, it is still important to take note of some helpful hints that will help you navigate the medical system and get the attention you deserve.



- Know your practice's policies. This should be done prior to selecting a practice and can be obtained by speaking with the practice's office manager or front desk personnel. First, be sure the practice accepts your insurance. Ask about hours and locations that fit your schedule. Does your doctor have a hospital affiliation? If so, make sure that you are comfortable with the hospital because that is the facility where you will be admitted in event of emergency. Inquire about your doctor's training and years in practice. Also note other allied health professionals in the practice. Many groups have nurse practitioners and physician assistants that will be directly involved in your care. Ask about how the practice handles after-hour emergencies so you can be well prepared.

- When going for a doctor's visit, take some time to make a list of the problems that have been bothering you. If you tend to get nervous or forget, then write it down. Try to focus on the main two to three big problems and if there are other concerns, let your doctor know about them so they can be evaluated at a subsequent visit. The unfortunate reality is that many offices can only allow for a brief visit. Bringing up many problems at once can short change these important issues that deserve the most attention.

- ALWAYS be aware of the names and dosages of the medications you are taking and the reasons for them. For those of you on several medications, I recommend writing them on a card that can be neatly folded and placed in your wallet. Bring that information to all your visits and remember to update it if changes are made.

- Take responsibility for your health! Nobody can care for your wellness as well as you can! Bring readings of your blood pressure and blood sugar if you have such problems. Ask for copies of studies and blood work. Know and learn about your diseases. There are plenty of Web sites such as WebMD that help the general public learn about their health. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Know why you are being prescribed a medication, its side effects and possible interactions with other medications you are taking.

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- Always call ahead when running low on medications; don't let them run out! Abrupt discontinuation of some medications, such as blockers used in hypertension can actually be dangerous.

Busy staff may not be able to call in your prescription in a timely fashion. Also call ahead for those who need specialist referrals. Allow enough time for

your health care provider to fill out forms or other paperwork. It may not be possible for him/her to be able to complete these documents at the time of your medical visit.

- If your nerves get the best of you, it may be helpful to bring a trusted family member, spouse or friend to come along to discuss treatment plans. Be prepared to accompany elderly or debilitated folks if you are an active caregiver. Don't be afraid to take notes during your visit. Whatever helps, just do it!

- Update your information. Report changes of name, phone number and address to your provider, especially if you are undergoing testing. It can be difficult to get test results to you in a timely fashion if your physician is unable to find you. Always ask your doctor how test results are conveyed and the time frame to expect them. If you don't hear back during that time, don't assume the results are negative. Be sure to phone and confirm the results.

Remember, put your health first, before all other things. Sadly enough, many people put more effort into investigating a big purchase than in their own well-being. No one can do it as well as you can, so take good care of yourself!

Dr. Laura Picciano is a board-certified internist with a busy practice in Center City Philadelphia. She graduated from Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine in 1996 and completed her Internal Medicine residency program there as well. Dr. Picciano has also done training in the field of bariatric medicine. To contact Dr. Picciano, email her at drpicciano@phillyfitmagazine.com.

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