

How to talk with your doctor

Your relationship with your doctor should be a partnership – where you and your doctor work together to make the best possible decisions about your health care.

It is very important that you be able to communicate openly and honestly with your doctor about any health care needs or concerns. At the same time, your doctor should be able to communicate important health

information to you in a clear, understandable way.

A study in the December 22/29, 1999, issue of *JAMA* reports that communications between some physicians and their patients need to be improved so that patients can be completely informed and participate in decisions about their medical care.

PREPARE FOR AN OFFICE VISIT:

Preparing for a visit with your doctor will ensure that you take full advantage of the time you have together. Here are some suggested steps you can take before your visit:

- Write down any questions you want to discuss with your doctor during your visit, or give the list to your doctor so that he or she can go over them with you.
- Write down any symptoms or health concerns you have. Try to be as specific as possible, and include what the symptoms are, when they started, what the symptoms feel like, any lifestyle changes you made when the symptoms started, anything that triggers the symptoms, or anything that relieves the symptoms.
- Be prepared to tell your doctor about all the medications you take, including prescription and nonprescription medications, vitamins, alternative therapies, and other supplements you may take.
- Be completely honest about your lifestyle, including your diet, use of alcohol or other drugs, smoking history, sexual history, and other health care you receive.
- Be sure to inform your doctor about any cultural or religious beliefs that may affect a treatment option.
- Make sure you understand your doctor's recommendations.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR DOCTOR:

Your doctor should:

- Provide information about your condition and any tests or procedures in a manner so that you easily understand.
- Take the time to answer your questions thoroughly.
- Give you specific instructions for treating your condition and taking any medications that are prescribed.
- Know about the latest advances in medicine and be able to answer your questions about them.
- Encourage you to participate in decisions about your care.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

All discussions with your doctor are confidential. Your doctor will not share information about your health with anyone else unless you provide permission. So don't be afraid to be completely open and honest about sensitive medical issues. Your disclosures should be met with understanding and possible solutions. If you don't feel comfortable talking openly with your doctor, you may want to consider changing doctors.

SPECIALISTS:

Specialists are doctors who concentrate on certain body systems, specific age groups, or complex scientific techniques developed to diagnose or treat certain types of disorders. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist if your condition is outside his or her area of expertise. You may want to seek out a specialist yourself if you need a second opinion on a medical diagnosis or treatment plan, or if your doctor recommends elective surgery.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Medical Association
AMA Physician Select
www.ama-assn.org/aps/amahg.htm
- American Board of Medical Specialties
Public Education Program
(verify a doctor's certification status or find a specialty doctor)
800/776-2378 or
www.certifieddoctor.org
Which Medical Specialist for You
(\$1.50 each)
or www.abms.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: American Medical Association (www.ama-assn.org/insight/gen_hlth/doctor/communic.htm), The C. Everett Koop Institute at Dartmouth, American Board of Medical Specialties

Mi Young Hwang, Writer

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

Jeff Molter, Director of Science News

The *JAMA* Patient Page is a public service of *JAMA* and the AMA. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, *JAMA* and the AMA suggest that you consult your physician. This page may be reproduced noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. Any other reproduction is subject to AMA approval. To purchase bulk reprints, call 212/354-0050.

