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## Talking with your doctor

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### Summary

- To get the most out of your conversation with your doctor, nurse or other healthcare provider, it is important that you are open about providing information.
  - Ask your doctor to repeat information if it isn't clear or if you didn't understand it.
  - Consider your options before making a decision – ask questions about your diagnosis and treatment and about other available treatments that could help you.
  - Follow up when you get back home from an appointment – call for your test results and make all the other appointments that you need.
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Many people find it difficult to talk about their problems with their doctor, nurse or other healthcare professional. To get the most out of your conversation with your doctor, nurse or other healthcare professional, it is best to be open about providing information and to speak up when you don't understand something or think it's 'not quite right'.

Your healthcare professional will not judge you, and they are trained to listen and to help you find the best outcomes for your situation.

These suggestions apply equally to doctors (or other healthcare professionals) in a community health centre, private clinic or hospital.

### Getting ready to visit your doctor

Usually, when you first call your doctor to make an appointment (or when you first arrive at hospital) you will speak to a receptionist. Things that you should mention to the receptionist include:

- whether you would like an interpreter – a professional interpreter will be arranged for you so that you and your doctor understand each other clearly
- whether you specifically want to see either a male or female doctor.

Things that you can do to prepare before you visit your doctor include:

- writing down in a notebook all your reasons for your visit, and any concerns or questions that you might have about your situation
- preparing a list of all your medications, your doses and how often you take them (or take your medications along with you)
- making sure that you have your Medicare card with you
- arranging to have someone (such as a friend or family member) with you at your appointment – you might want them to speak on your behalf or help you to remember important information, or to be there for comfort and support
- making sure that you have your glasses or hearing aids with you (if you use them)
- choosing clothes to wear for your visit that can be easily removed, if required.

### Sharing information with your doctor

Once you are with your doctor or other healthcare professional, be ready to have a discussion. Open communication is a two-way process. The information you give about yourself, your concerns and your situation is important. Speak up and let your doctor know about your thoughts and concerns. They are trained to listen and will not judge or criticise you.

### Things you should tell your doctor

You might find it helpful to take notes during your visit, so that you can go over them later at home. Things that you

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should mention to your doctor include:

- your symptoms – describe what they are and how long you've been having them
- your concerns or things that you think are unusual about your health – don't assume it is normal
- any recent medical appointments or treatments (such as visits to emergency or to other doctors or healthcare professionals)
- all the medications that you have recently taken or are currently taking – this includes over-the-counter medicines, as well as vitamins, herbal and other nutritional supplements.

### **Things you should ask your doctor**

You can also ask your doctor for information. This can include:

- asking them to repeat something if you do not understand what they have said to you
- asking if there are any handouts, pamphlets, websites or other places where you can get information that will help you to understand the health concerns that you are discussing
- requesting a printout of your prescriptions, if your medications have changed
- asking about your medication, such as what it is for, questions about the dose or if there is an alternative that you can be given
- asking about things that you can do to avoid getting sick next time
- telling them that you need more time to discuss your concerns – you may need to make another appointment, or your doctor may suggest that you talk to a nurse or other healthcare professional.

### **Making decisions with your doctor**

Sometimes, your doctor may say things that are not very clear or that you do not understand. It is important that you ask them to explain things to you.

Things that your doctor can explain include:

- any treatments that they suggest
- other treatments that are available to you
- how the treatment will help you
- any risks or side effects of the treatment
- how much time you have before you have to make a decision about the treatment.

To make sure that you have understood everything, repeat back your doctor's advice or instructions in your own words. Your doctor can explain things again to you, if necessary.

### **Discussing your options with your doctor**

It is important to let your doctor know about your preferences. For example, you might want to consider other options instead of surgery. Your doctor might then refer you to a specialist or discuss the reasons why these are the best treatment options for you.

It is fine to see another doctor to get a second opinion if you are not sure about a diagnosis or a treatment that your doctor suggests. This could involve getting a referral to a different specialist or making an appointment with another doctor or healthcare professional. If you decide to seek a second opinion, it is important that you don't put it off.

If you know that the advice or suggested treatment is not right for you and your situation, you should tell your doctor the reasons why.

### **After your visit or appointment with your doctor**

Once you get home from your appointment, there are things that you should do next. These include:

- following up on test results – find out who you need to phone and when your results will be ready
- making any other appointments that you have been told you need
- making sure you know how to take your medication or treatment – if you cannot remember, ask your

pharmacist (they may ring your doctor to check)

- calling your doctor's office, clinic or hospital if you have more questions about your situation.

### **Talking with your doctor or healthcare professional in different settings**

You might visit a doctor or healthcare professional in a private clinic, community health centre, hospital or emergency department. Even if your doctor has referred you for further care or for assessment, it is still important to have a conversation about your situation and to provide as much information as you can.

#### **Visiting a private clinic or an outpatient clinic**

Your doctor might refer you to visit a specialist or other healthcare professional for assessment or treatment. In this situation, your doctor will have communicated and passed on information about your health, but it is important for you to also be open with information.

#### **Admission to hospital**

Usually, your doctor (or their reception staff) has arranged for your admission to hospital. It is likely that a team of healthcare professionals will be looking after you. Your doctor will have communicated and passed on information about your situation, but it is important for you to also talk openly about your situation.

#### **Visiting the emergency department of a hospital**

If you are taken to the emergency department by ambulance, the paramedics will be the first people you talk with. They will ask for specific information to help them to give you the best treatment possible. Of course, if your situation is critical, then the healthcare professionals might have to make rapid decisions about the best course of action.

If you take yourself to the emergency department or if someone else takes you, the receptionist (or clerical staff member) is usually your first point of contact and will record your details.

After the receptionist in the emergency department records your details, a triage nurse will assess your injury or illness.

It is important that you (or the person who takes you to emergency) provide as much information as possible. This will help the nurses and doctors to decide the best course of action for your situation.

If you have warning that you will be going to the emergency department, information that you could take with you includes:

- a list of all your medications and doses – if you do not have time to make a list, take your medications with you
- your Medicare card (or passport if you are not an Australian citizen)
- the contact details of your doctor.

#### **Being discharged from hospital**

Before you leave hospital, make sure that you know what you need to do when you are back at home. It might be helpful to write things you need to do in a notebook or ask a healthcare professional in the hospital to do this for you before you leave.

When you are back home, make an appointment with your local doctor to follow up on any medications or treatments that you were given while you were in hospital.

#### **Where to get help**

- Your GP (doctor)
- Your healthcare professional
- **NURSE-ON-CALL** 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- **Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency** (AHPRA) Tel. 1300 419 495
- **Office of the Health Complaints Commissioner** Tel. 1800 136 066 or (03) 8601 5200

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- **Medicines Line (Australia)** Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines

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