Seeing a doctor or general practitioner (GP)

Summary

- Your general practitioner (also known as your ‘GP’ or ‘local doctor’) is usually the first person you go to if you have a health problem.
- If you have special needs such as wanting to see a female doctor, ask the receptionist when you make your appointment.
- Get ready for your appointment by making notes about your symptoms.
- Your doctor will be able to recommend the best treatment for you if you give honest answers to questions.
- If you are considering stopping your medication, let your doctor know first, as there can be problems with doing this.

Developing an ongoing relationship with a general practitioner (GP) who you trust and are comfortable with is an effective way of managing your health and wellbeing.

Role of a doctor

Your local doctor or GP is your first point of contact for non-emergency and preventative medical care during clinic hours (which will vary for each clinic). GPs are trained in medicine and are qualified to treat people for general health problems, such as illnesses or injuries that cannot be treated by over-the-counter medication. Some GPs specialise in particular areas, such as children’s health or aged care.

Developing an ongoing relationship with one GP is often the most effective way of managing your healthcare. They will get to know you over time and become familiar with your medical history. You may need to visit a few GPs before you find the one who you trust most and feel comfortable with.

If you are seeing multiple healthcare practitioners for either the same or different health issues, your GP is the best person to coordinate your overall healthcare.

Typical services provided by a GP include:

- diagnosing and treating disease, pain and other conditions
- vaccinations
- mental health advice
- family planning advice
- wound care
- prescribing medication
- writing referrals for tests or scans
- referring you to specialists.

Making an appointment with a doctor

When you make a doctor’s appointment, you are automatically given a short appointment (10-15 minutes is standard). If you are worried that it will not be enough time, ask for a long appointment. For example, you may like do this the first time you see a new doctor or if it is for a family visit.

If you are concerned about how long you’ll have to wait, try making your appointment for the first time slot in the morning, or the first time slot after lunch.

Sometimes, because of cultural and other beliefs, or preferences, it is important for a person to see a doctor or
other health professional of the same gender. If this is the case, make sure you ask when making your appointment. If you need an interpreter, you should also ask for this to be organised when you book in.

**Preparing for your doctor’s appointment**

To get the most out of your appointment with the doctor, a little preparation can save a lot of time or return visits. Think about what you want to get out of your consultation. For example, do you want to talk about new symptoms or do you need a new prescription?

It can be a good idea to:

- make some notes about specific symptoms you are experiencing. It will help the doctor if you record when they occurred, how long they lasted and what you were doing right before you felt them
- make a list of questions. Be sure to list the most important ones first
- think about your medical history and any illnesses in the family. Ask other family members if you do not know
- write down what medication you are taking and the dosage. Include over-the-counter medication, vitamins and herbal remedies as well
- take copies or reports from any recent tests
- allow plenty of time to travel to the clinic so you do not miss your appointment
- be sure to take your Medicare card and your health care or Veterans’ Affairs card if you have one
- bring your health insurance details
- remember you are always welcome to take a support person with you.

**Talking to your doctor**

The most important thing when speaking with your doctor is to be honest and upfront. To make the best assessment of your needs, your GP will need to have a full understanding of your medical history, all medication you are taking and lifestyle habits such as smoking, illicit drug use, diet and physical activity.

Be as specific as you can about your symptoms. Rather than just saying ‘I have a sore arm’, explain exactly where the pain is, what type of pain it is (dull, throbbing, sharp, stabbing, constant, intermittent), and things that make it feel better (such as heat packs, rest or elevation) or worse (such as exercise).

If your doctor recommends a course of treatment you are not comfortable with, ask about the alternatives and ask your doctor to explain the pros and cons of each so you can make an informed decision.

Make sure you are clear about your doctor’s instructions before you leave. If you are in doubt about what they mean, ask for more information. Take a notebook if you want to take notes or bring a support person with you to help you remember the information. Ask for printed information to take home with you if necessary.

**Paying to see a doctor**

GP visits in Victoria are covered either partly or fully by Medicare. The decision about how much is covered is left up to each GP or clinic. There are also different prices for long consultations. Medicare reimburses doctors for consultations at a set rate. If a doctor wishes to charge more than the set rate, those extra charges will be passed on to you.

‘Bulk-billing’ means that the full cost of your GP consultation is covered by Medicare. The doctor will bill Medicare directly for the consultation, rather than you.

Payment varies from clinic to clinic. Some GPs bulk-bill for children and ‘walk-in’ patients (who have to wait for the next available appointment) while charging a fee for patients who wish to make an appointment and for all consultations on the weekend.

All GP clinics will charge for travel vaccinations and some will charge for complex procedures such as mole removal. There is, however, no standard practice across Victoria. For specific information, check your clinic’s website or ask when making your appointment.
After your doctor's appointment

If your doctor has prescribed medication, you will need to visit a pharmacy (or chemist) to have your prescription filled. Ask the pharmacist questions if you are unsure about your medication. They may be able to provide you with extra information to help you understand your prescription, over-the-counter or herbal medicines.

The pharmacist may offer you a ‘generic’ brand of medication that is cheaper than the brand your doctor prescribed. Ask the pharmacist to explain any differences between what was prescribed and the generic brand. The choice is then up to you. Sometimes, your doctor will specify that you should not substitute the prescribed brand for a generic brand. If this is the case, follow your doctor’s instructions.

If, once you start taking the medication, you have problems with your treatment:

- Don’t change the treatment without speaking to your doctor.
- Tell your doctor about any unwanted side effects.
- Work with your doctor to find a treatment that works better for you.

Where to get help

- Your GP

- The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP), call 1800 472 247 or email racgp@racgp.org.au

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