

Talking with Your Doctor

The healthcare setting can be very intimidating for the average person. It is a high-tech world with a highly trained staff that uses medical language and codes few "outsiders" can understand.

The combination of illness, caregiving stress, and being cared for in such a mysterious setting can create a lot of anxiety and fear for patients and families. This page contains information to enable you to communicate more effectively with healthcare professionals and to better understand the healthcare system.

Tips for Communicating with Your Doctor

- When you go to see the doctor, make a list of your questions so you won't forget to ask your doctor about them.
- Be clear about what you want to say to the doctor.
- If you have a lot of things to discuss, make a consultation appointment so the doctor can allow enough time for you.
- If you don't understand what the doctor tells you, don't be afraid to ask him/her to explain further or in a different way until you understand.
- Learn the routine at your doctor's office so you can make the system work for you, not against you.
- Ask the doctor to provide written instructions about any medications or other treatments that he/she prescribes for your loved one.
- Record the information the doctor gives you. With the doctor's permission, bring along a tape recorder so you can play back your conversation later. Another option is to take along a notepad and write down important information.
- Make your doctor's nurse or assistant your ally.
- Recognize that not all questions have answers (especially those starting with "why").
- Tell your doctor if you are not following his/her recommendations and why.
- Tell your doctor how much you want to know. Do you want all the details or just the big picture? Do you want a family member or close friend included in these conversations?
- Bring up problems even if the doctor doesn't ask.
- Appreciate what the doctor is doing to help and say thank you from time to time.
- Be courteous and firm.

Understanding Your Doctor's Perspective

Despite some opinions to the contrary, doctors really are people and they react to situations the same way the rest of us do. They feel pain when people are suffering and they get angry when things go wrong. Their tension mounts when they have too much to do and not enough time in which to do it. They respond positively to understanding and respect.

For some doctors, the emotional pain of patients is more frightening to deal with than the physical pain. This is especially true when the doctor is the bearer of bad news.

The biggest roadblock to communication among caregivers and doctors stems from the fact that they think about illness and disability differently: Caregivers think in terms of impact of illness and disability on their loved one's life. Doctors think in terms of disease or abnormality in the structure and function of the body.