



MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS

GETTING THE MOST FROM OFFICE VISITS

Health care office visits are usually very short. Many times, patients leave the office feeling they haven't been listened to. They may have more questions than when they arrived. This fact sheet talks about ways to prepare for your next office visit. It also offers advice on how to get the most from your health care provider. Many people get their care from a physician's assistant or a nurse practitioner. When this fact sheet talks about your "doctor" it means any of these health care professionals.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT PROVIDER!

If you and your provider don't have the same approach to your health care, it will be difficult to be satisfied with your appointments. Fact Sheet 202 has more information on choosing a health care provider.

PREPARE AHEAD OF TIME

What's been going on since your last appointment? Write a list to use during your appointment. Be sure to include:

- **New health problems or symptoms**, related to HIV or not. How long have they been going on? How serious are they? Don't ignore feeling tired, not sleeping well, trouble concentrating, stomach problems or emotional issues like anxiety.
- **New or increasing side effects** or reactions to your medications. Again, for how long? How serious are they?
- **Medication compliance:** How well you've been taking your medications. Have you missed doses? If so, why?
- **Supplements or alternative therapies** the doctor doesn't already know about
- **Major changes in your living situation**, including employment, relationships, non-HIV health issues, and so on.

You may not have time to discuss all of these, so focus on the most important items. You can leave a note with the doctor to let them know about the items you didn't get to discuss.

Bring information with you to help your doctor. This might include pill bottles for all of the medications and supplements

you're taking, lab reports or test results from other health care providers.

KEEP TRACK OF THE TIME

Show up for your appointments! That's the only way your doctor can make sure you're getting the best treatment to maintain your health. If you arrive late for your appointment, you can throw off the office schedule for the rest of the day. If you skip an appointment, you're wasting time for the doctor, the office staff, and other patients.

On the other hand, it can be very frustrating to get to your appointment on time and have to wait. Usually this means that a serious health problem came up for another patient earlier in the day. If you're ever the one with that problem, you'll appreciate the doctor spending more time with you. It can be a good idea to call the doctor's office before you leave home to see if appointments are running on time, or are delayed.

DON'T BE A HERO

If you're having a hard time taking your medications correctly, tell your doctor! Maybe a side effect that didn't use to bother you is getting impossible to deal with. Maybe you'd do better with a simpler medication schedule. Your health care providers can't help you unless they know about these issues. Don't worry about not being a good patient or upsetting your doctor. They want the best for your health!

GET YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

When you walk in to your appointment, you should know the most important questions that you want answered before you leave. It's a good idea to write these down. This will help you organize your thoughts and make it easier to know if you're missing something.

Take your list into your appointment. Tell the doctor about your questions. If the appointment is ending and you don't have your answers, ask for them! Doctors have to manage their time, but you also have to manage your appointment time. You might only have fifteen minutes every few months, so make the most of it!

Medications: If a new drug gets prescribed, make sure you leave with information on exactly how to take it. What's the dosage? How often? Does it matter if you take it with food, or on an empty stomach? Does it have to be kept in the refrigerator?

Know what side effects to expect. Are there things you can do at home to deal with them? When should you call the office if the side effects are too severe or go on for too long?

Tests: If your doctor wants you to have some medical tests, be sure you understand what the test results are supposed to show and what your doctor will do with them. When you discuss the test results, ask again if you're not sure what the test is for and what the results mean.

Don't be embarrassed if you don't understand the answers to your questions. Tell the doctor that you don't understand. **It's not rude to insist on getting your questions answered. That's the only way to be a better partner in your own health!**

TAKE THE ANSWERS WITH YOU

There's usually a lot of information going quickly back and forth during a health care appointment. Be sure to take that information home with you!

Some of these tips might work for you:

- **Take notes** during the appointment.
- **Ask for written material** about medications, side effects, and illnesses.
- **Talk to someone.** See if there's anyone in the office you can talk to, like a nurse or a counselor, to go over what happened in your appointment.
- **Bring a friend with you** to the appointment. Let them know what you want to get out of the office visit. You could give them a copy of your questions, so they can make sure they all get answered. They can also pay attention to what the doctor says. That way you can sit down together after the appointment and be sure you didn't miss anything.

Reviewed April 26, 2007