

# Getting the Most Out of Appointments: For Patients

How often do you leave a medical visit feeling satisfied that your healthcare providers heard your concerns and responded to them? Successful communication with your health care team requires effort from the patient and the doctor or nurse.

## Here are a few tips to consider:

- Make a list of questions or concerns you would like to discuss at your appointment. Mark the ones that are most important to address. Put your list in a place where it will be easy to remember to bring it with you..
- Ask your questions *at the beginning* of your visit. Start by asking the ones that are most important to you.
- If you do not have a chance to ask your questions at the beginning of your visit, tell your doctor you have a list of questions and ask when is a good time to share it.
- Consider giving the doctor a copy of your list so he or she can follow along.



## When you ask your questions:

**Don't downplay the symptoms or situation.** Remarks like "it's just a little cough" or "my pain really isn't a problem" might lead your doctor to the same conclusion. If your real fear is that your sister's lung cancer started with a similar cough, let the doctor know. If your pain is preventing you from getting any sleep, say so. Being up front with your doctor helps them understand your problem.

**Listen.** Take some deep breaths and focus on what the doctor is saying. Consider bringing a tape recorder or taking notes on paper. If someone else is with you at the appointment, ask them to take notes for you.

**Ask for explanations.** Don't hesitate to ask when words the doctor is using are unfamiliar or his or her instructions are not clear to you. Make sure you hear—and understand—the answers you get. Consider bringing someone to your appointment to help you understand and remember what you heard. If you don't understand or are confused, ask your doctor to explain the answer again.



**Make sure you understand the next steps.** It is very important to understand the plan that your doctor recommends. Ask questions!



## Getting the Most Out of Appointments: For Care Partners

Not all Care Partners accompany their Patient Partners to their medical appointments. If your Patient Partner wants you to attend, and it fits into your schedule, consider going to at least one of their VA primary care appointments.

Patients who are accompanied to medical visits by a trusted supporter often communicate better with their doctors and nurses. They are able to get more of their questions answered and remember more of the information they hear.

Also, when you attend your partner's appointment, you can get to know your partner's doctors and nurses. That might make it easier if you need to contact them in between your Patient Partner's appointments.

### Some tips for Care Partners attending medical appointments:

- **Educate yourself about your loved one's condition.** Use the Internet as a tool, but try to stick with reliable sources. You can ask doctors or nurses which websites they respect.
- **Write it down.** Have everything that's on your mind written down before you talk with the doctor. The more organized you are, the more help you can get. You can discuss with your Patient Partner what you both think should be on the visit planning worksheet you can find in the back of this handbook.



- **Let your Patient Partner take the lead when possible.** You can prompt your Patient Partner to use the question list that the two of you prepared before your appointment.
- **It is best to ask questions at the beginning** of the appointment. Talk about the most important concerns first. Be brief and stick to the point.
- **After your Patient Partner is finished** describing a problem or concern, you can fill in extra details.
- **After your Patient Partner has finished** asking their questions, you can add any of your own.
- **If you disagree with your Patient Partner, try to point it out in a neutral and specific way.** For example, “Hmmm. He used to check his sugar three times per day but when I look at his sugar log I only see numbers written down once per day.” Don’t overgeneralize or make accusations. (*NOT* “He is so lazy. He never tries to take care of his health.”) Staying positive is helpful to everyone.
- **If the doctor or nurse gives recommendations, make sure you and your Patient Partner understand.** Don’t hesitate to ask when the instructions are not clear. Make sure you understand what the next steps are.



- **Help the doctors and nurses understand your role.** If there are certain parts of health care you help with, or certain health information you keep track of, tell the doctors and nurses. Make sure the doctor tells you all the information related to what you do. Ask them to keep you informed even when you can't come to the patient's medical visits.
- **Appoint one family member** as the main family contact with healthcare professionals when possible. This will avoid confusion and save time for everyone.
- **Ask about other resources.** The primary care staff can often point you to health programs or resources that might help your Patient Partner.





# Between Appointments: For Patients

## After your appointment

- Make plans to follow your doctor's or nurse's recommendations. Discuss your plans with your Care Partner.
- Make appointments to have tests done or see a specialist if you need to.
- Review your (or your Care Partner's) notes from the appointment, or the printed visit summary you receive, to make sure you haven't forgotten any key things you discussed at your appointment.

## Call your primary care team at any time:

- If you do not understand, or have trouble following, the doctor's or nurse's instructions after you get home.
- To find out test results if you haven't received them within a week of the test date. Do not assume that no news is good news. Ask what you should do about the results.
- To ask about test results you do not understand.
- If you experience any side effects or problems with your medicines.
- If your symptoms get worse (or do not get better).
- If you receive any new prescriptions from another doctor or start taking any over-the-counter medicines.
- If you have any questions about your self-care regimen.



# Between Appointments: For Care Partners

## After an appointment

- Help and encourage your Patient Partner to make plans for how to follow their doctor's or nurse's recommendations.
- Discuss the Visit Summary that you and your partner receive.
- Talk to your Patient Partner about making appointments to have tests done or to see specialists if your partner needs to.

**You and your partner should plan to contact your partner's primary care team if your partner:**

- has problems following, or does not understand, the doctor or nurse's instructions.
- does not receive test results within a week of the test date. Do not assume that no news is good news.
- does not understand test results.
- experiences any side effects or other problems with their medicines.
- has symptoms that get worse (or do not get better).
- receives any new prescriptions from another doctor or starts taking any over-the-counter medicines.
- has any questions about their self-care regimen.

Patients who talk with or call their primary care team tend to be happier with their care and have better medical results. You should encourage your Patient Partner to contact their primary care team themselves whenever possible. However, if your Patient Partner feels that you are the best person to call, that is OK too. If you call, be sure to write down what the doctor or nurse says, and share it with your Patient Partner as soon as possible.

