

# **you and your doctor**

*How to get the*

*most out of your*

*consultation*

This booklet is supported by a grant.



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## Introduction

Many people do not get the best out of their doctor. How often do you come out of a consultation wishing that you had asked that important question or you feel you have not understood what the doctor has told you? If you have been in this situation then this booklet is for you. It has been written to give you practical advice to help you to make the most of your time with the doctor. A well planned consultation will not only make it less stressful for you but will also help your doctor to give you a better service.

At the back of the booklet you will see spaces for you to write your questions and notes and also to write down what the doctor tells you. As most of us forget at least half of what we have been told within five minutes, writing reminders is a great help.

Some of you may be approaching your doctor following initial advice from telephone helplines and information sources found on the internet such as NHS Direct. Others of you may have already sought advice from a walk-in clinic and are visiting your doctor to follow up a diagnosis or treatment plan. If you are one of these people, this booklet is just as relevant for you as for those who are planning your first discussion with your doctor. You will still need to think about how you wish to use the information received from these sources to get the most out of your appointment.

## The doctor/patient relationship

The doctor/patient relationship is a unique one. Whilst all successful human relationships are founded on mutual respect, in the healthcare setting, patients can feel vulnerable in ways which do not exist in other walks of life.

### *The doctor*

Good two-way communication lies at the root of successful doctor/patient relationship building and the doctor plays a crucial role in fostering good relations. You should expect your doctor to:

- Listen to you and respect your views
- Treat you politely and considerately
- Respect your privacy and dignity
- Treat information about you as confidential
- Give you the information you ask for about your condition, its treatment and prognosis
- Give information to you in a way you can understand
- Ensure, wherever possible, you have understood what is proposed and that you have consented to it, before investigations are carried out or treatment provided
- Respect your right to be fully involved in decisions about your care
- Respect your right to decline treatment or to take part in teaching or research
- Respect your right to a second opinion

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## ***The patient***

Your doctor faces challenges in making sure that he or she understands your concerns and problems, whilst remaining sensitive of your needs as an individual. Within the time limitations of appointments, he or she often has very little time in which to do this.

Your challenge is to appreciate the doctor's situation and to assist him or her to understand your condition and/or concerns.

Successfully meeting these challenges is at the heart of a long term partnership with your doctor

You can help your doctor provide a good service to you by being a responsible patient. This means that you should:

- Keep your appointment or cancel in good time
- Not always expect a prescription
- Order repeat prescriptions in good time
- Follow the doctor's medication
- Think before calling out the doctor for a home visit: if you can, call the doctor as early as possible and only call when it is really necessary
- Be polite and reasonable
- Use your time with your doctor properly
- Be honest and open with your doctor (if you are too embarrassed to discuss a topic with your doctor, consider writing it down in a letter)
- Tell him/her about any medicines you are taking and/or allergies you may have

## The GP appointment

Your appointment with your GP is likely to last between 5 and 10 minutes so you will need to make the best use of your time. It will help both you and your GP if you can cover the most important points first.

Doctors should welcome any effort you have made to obtain information about your problem. Sources may include the internet or a telephone helpline.

However, your doctor may have concerns about the quality of the information available from these sources and about the possibility of you misinterpreting your condition as a result. Therefore do not be offended if he or she sets aside any of the information you have brought with you. Your doctor should explain the reasons why.



“Your appointment with your GP is likely to last between 5 and 10 minutes so you will need to make the best use of your time”

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As time will be limited, it will be helpful if you make a list of the main questions you wish to ask, highlighting two or three of the most important.

During your appointment your doctor will ask you a number of questions to help him or her to gain an understanding of your condition and consider how to proceed with treatment. Thinking through some answers to some of the following questions may help you prepare for your consultation and assist your doctor to reach an accurate diagnosis.

- When did the problem begin? Think of a date if possible
- What are the main symptoms?
- Is there a pattern to them?
- Have the symptoms got worse, stayed the same or do they fluctuate up and down?
- How has it affected the way you live?
  - has it changed your sleep pattern?
  - have you needed to stay off work or cancel appointments?
  - has your appetite altered?
  - has your mood changed? (eg, depression, tension, lethargy, panic attacks)
- What makes your symptoms worse and what makes them better?
- Could any recent changes in lifestyle have contributed to your illness?
- If the main symptom is pain, can you grade your pain on a scale of 1-10? (1 being mild and 10 being unbearable)
- Have you had this problem before and, if so, when?
- Have you taken medicines for these symptoms either in the past or present?

### **Diagnosis**

When your doctor makes a diagnosis, do not be afraid to ask for an explanation of any medical terms or jargon you do not understand. Ask your doctor to write names down for you. Do make notes to remind yourself of what has been said.

Do not leave the surgery without a clear understanding of what the doctor believes the problem is and how the condition should improve with the proposed treatment. If your doctor recommends further tests or treatment make sure you know what the next step is and who will contact you. If you have to see your doctor again, find out when you should book the appointment for. Do not forget to ask what developments or change in symptoms you should look for if you need to book an earlier appointment.

If you think of more questions after leaving the surgery, write them down and book a further appointment or ask to speak to your doctor on the telephone. The receptionist will give you a time to call back when the doctor is not seeing other patients.

### **Treatment**

When any medication is prescribed, make sure that you get full instructions about when and how to take it. Do not forget to mention any over-the-counter or herbal remedies you are taking as they may interact with the medicine your doctor has prescribed for you.



Ask about any common side-effects you might experience.

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You will have a second opportunity to check the details of your medication when you collect your prescription from your pharmacist. He or she will be pleased to give you advice and answer your questions and will often be able to give you helpful information leaflets.

### ***Obtaining a second opinion***

If you feel that you would benefit from a second opinion either by another GP or by a hospital specialist, do not be afraid to ask. Although this can be difficult as no doctor likes to feel that his or her competence is being questioned, it is worth being quietly insistent. Confrontation is unlikely to prove beneficial in the long term and so you should adopt a non-threatening approach using phrases such as, "Just to reassure me...". If your polite persistence draws a blank and you feel your needs are not being met by your doctor, or that you are persistently not being listened to, you could try changing your GP, although such a decision should not be taken lightly. You have the right to change your GP easily and quickly.

You also have the option of choosing to see a doctor privately, if you so wish.

### ***Getting a referral***

If your doctor feels that he or she needs more specialised knowledge for a diagnosis or that you may need specialist treatment, you should agree with your doctor to be referred to a hospital specialist. If you would like to be referred to a specialist privately you should tell your doctor.

Check which specialist your GP is proposing and enquire about his or her field of interest. Identifying the right person can make a difference to your future health.

You have a right to be referred to a consultant acceptable to you, when your GP thinks that it is necessary, and to be referred for a second opinion if you and your GP agree that this is desirable.

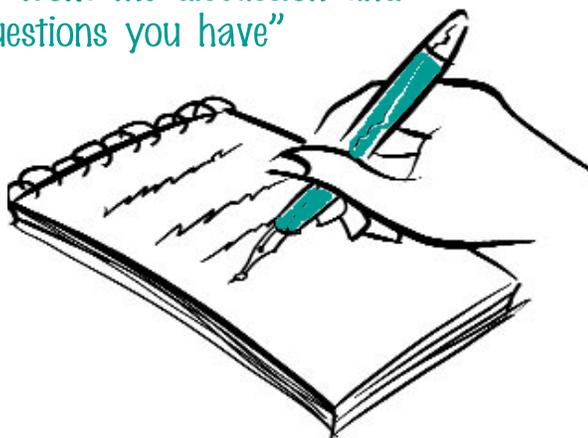
## The specialist consultation

Your GP will write to the specialist and make the appointment on your behalf. Make sure you know who will contact you, how long this is likely to take and what you should do if you hear nothing after a certain period of time. If the wait is unduly long and you can travel, enquire if you could be referred to another area where waiting times are shorter.

Both you and your specialist will receive a letter from your doctor which will contain an overview of your condition, but it is important that you can describe your symptoms to the specialist clearly when you meet. Use the details you prepared for your GP consultation and add any information that brings them up to date with any changes in your condition.

Before the consultation write down what you want to achieve from the discussion and any questions you have. Doctors tend to ask you if you have any questions at the end of the consultation and by that time you may feel unable to take up more of the doctor's time. Try to ask the most important questions first.

“Write down what you want to achieve from the discussion and any questions you have”



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Although you may have a longer time with the specialist, you will not be able to 'pop back' for clarification of a point, as you can with your GP.

If possible, ask a friend or partner to accompany you to the consultation and make notes on what is said. If you cannot find anyone to go along with you, take a pad and pen to note down yourself what the specialist recommends. Explain to your doctor that you are going to write down important points. Do not be afraid to ask him/her to spell or write down for you any medical terms or drug names that you want to note. Ask him/her to explain any medical terminology or jargon which you do not understand. It is a good idea to spend a few minutes immediately afterwards writing a brief summary of the main points covered during in the consultation.

### ***Tests and investigations***

If the specialist suggests further tests or hospital treatment the following checklist will help you obtain all the information you need about next steps.

If any tests are planned you should ask:

- What is the purpose of the tests?
- What are the implications of the tests?
- What will happen during the tests?
- What are the risks?
- When and where will the tests be carried out?
- How accurate are the tests?
- When will the results be available?

Sometimes tests may be carried out then and there during your consultation so make sure that you are informed.

## After the consultation

Following your consultation, the specialist will write to your GP to inform him or her of his or her opinion about your problem. Sometimes your specialist will tell you at the consultation what he or she recommends. However, a letter will always be written to your GP.

If tests have been done, the specialist will usually wait for the results before writing to your GP.

## The next steps

Your specialist may recommend that no further steps be taken. It might be that the results of your tests were negative and that a diagnosis has been excluded. This is often good news. It may be that your specialist recommends a specific course of treatment or surgical treatment.

### *Surgery*

If the specialist suggests surgery, you may wish to ask about his or her experience of performing the operation. It is, for instance, quite reasonable to ask how many times a year the specialist carries out the procedure and to ask for an indication of the results or outcomes of these operations. If you agree to proceed, you will eventually be asked to sign a consent form giving your approval for the surgeon to go ahead with your operation. The form states that you have been given sufficient information about the procedure, that you understand the risks involved and that you wish to proceed with surgery.

What you need to know before you sign the consent form:

- Do you understand the benefits of the operation?
- All operations carry some risk. Has the doctor explained these risks to you?
- Has the doctor explained to you or provided information as to what will happen before, during and after your operation?

## Questions you should ask.....

- Can routine medication be taken on the day of admission?
- What type of anaesthesia will be used, local, general or spinal?
- What are the side-effects of the anaesthetic?
- Who will carry out my operation?
- Will there be any pain and what will be done to control pain?
- What will the wound look like?
- What are the possible complications of the operation?
- How long will I stay in hospital?
- What support can I expect when I am discharged from hospital?
- When can return to a normal routine be expected (when can I go back work etc)?

Make sure that you understand the answers to your questions and that you raise any concerns that you may have.

If you are being seen privately, ask the specialist for an estimate of the costs of treatment. Do not forget to ask him or her to include consultant fees, anaesthetist fees, medication costs and 'hotel' costs (hospital accommodation).

If you have insurance cover for your treatment always telephone your insurer before you agree to the procedure to make sure that you are covered.

Once you have the information you need to make a decision about proceeding with treatment, do not be hurried into a decision if you feel unsure. If you feel you need time to think about your options and to find out more, do not be afraid to say so. Needing to talk to family or a partner can give you a good reason to take your time, but agree how and when you will get back to the specialist with a decision.

Remember, it is your right to have any proposed treatment, including any risks involved in that treatment and any alternatives, clearly explained to you before you decide whether to agree to it.

If, following your consultation, you are unclear about any aspect of your treatment, do not be frightened of telephoning the specialist and asking. You can also telephone the clinic and speak to the senior nursing staff who are usually well informed and helpful.

Do not be intimidated. Always remain calm, polite and firm.

## **If things go wrong**

You have a right to have any complaint about NHS services investigated (whoever provides them) and to get a full written reply quickly from the relevant chief executive or general manager. In private hospitals, complaints procedures vary although all major hospital groups will have a complaints procedure in place.

You may feel that instigating a full complaints procedure is inappropriate but you may nevertheless have views on the service you have received that you wish to voice. Chief executives are to be held responsible for all aspects of quality within their hospital so do please write to him/her with your thoughts and suggestions.

For further information contact the Patients Association and request a copy of 'Making a Complaint' booklet.

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## Finding out more

Finding out about your symptoms and your condition will help you to ask your doctor the right questions and save wasting time. Following an appointment or consultation, questions may occur to you that you wish to find the answers for yourself. An informed patient is good news for both the patient and the doctor.

Information is becoming increasingly easy to access at a variety of outlets including:

***Public libraries***

***Bookshops***

***Internet***

- NHS Direct: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)
- PA: [www.patients-association.com](http://www.patients-association.com)
- BUPA: [www.bupa.co.uk](http://www.bupa.co.uk)

***Patient support groups***

***Charities***

The Patients Association's own helpline will give you advice and information supported by the wide range of Patients Association leaflets. Call us on: 0845 6084455.

## To summarise

- Remember to prepare for your consultation and make notes
- Never be afraid to ask if you do not understand something
- Be polite but insistent
- Do not be intimidated
- Remember that you and your doctor are in partnership with each other
- Make the most of your time

## Prepare for your consultation

When did the problem begin? Think of a date if possible

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What are the main symptoms?

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Is there a pattern to them?

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Have the symptoms got worse, stayed the same or do they fluctuate up and down?

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How has your problem affected the way you live?

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- has it changed your sleep pattern?

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- have you needed to stay off work or cancel appointments?

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- has your appetite altered?

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- has your mood changed (eg, depression, tension, lethargy, panic attacks)

## Prepare for your consultation

What makes your symptoms worse and what makes them better?

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Could any recent changes in lifestyle have contributed to your illness?

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If the main symptom is pain, can you grade your pain on a scale of 1-10 (1 being mild and 10 being unbearable)

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Have you had this problem before and, if so, when?

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Have you taken medicines for these symptoms either in the past or present?

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Notes

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**Patients Association** PO Box 935 Harrow Middlesex HA1 3YJ  
Tel: 020 8423 9111 Fax: 020 8423 9119  
Helpline: 0845 6084455  
Email: [mailbox@patients-association.com](mailto:mailbox@patients-association.com)  
[www.patients-association.com](http://www.patients-association.com)

*Registered charity no. 1006722*

*Written by Mary Hicks  
Designed and printed by Direct Design*