Top 6 ways to get the most out of your doctor visit

It makes a difference when you prepare ahead of time, ask questions, and recap what was discussed.

It’s easy to feel rushed at a doctor’s appointment or unsure of the information and instructions you’re given. But with a little preparation you can become your own health advocate and feel like you’re getting the most out of your doctor visit.

“The medical system is complex and can be overwhelming. In order to get the best possible outcomes, it really helps to be an active consumer,” says Dr. Karen Joynt, a health policy researcher and a cardiologist at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women’s Hospital.

Use the following tips to take a more active role in your health care.

1. Prepare for the visit
   How many times have you left a doctor’s office only to think of a question you wish you had asked during the appointment? To avoid that, make a list of questions in the days leading up to your visit. The questions can be about something complicated, such as your treatment, or simple, such as whether you should get a flu shot, Dr. Joynt says. “Make sure you write down your questions. It’s so easy to forget what you wanted to ask when there’s time pressure and lots of things happening at once,” she adds.

2. Share your symptoms
   Volunteer information about your symptoms and other health concerns, even if you’re not asked. “The physician needs to know why you’re there and what’s bothering you,” Dr. Joynt says. “If it’s a general follow-up, think about the things that are health issues for you. Are you struggling with insomnia, or feeling sad all of the time, or having more heartburn than usual?” The more information your physician has, the better he or she can get to the bottom of what’s causing your ailment.

3. Ask questions
   Don’t hesitate to ask questions and voice concerns as they occur to you during the appointment. Dr. Joynt says patients often want to seem cooperative, and not appear pushy or ask what seems like a “dumb” question. “But remember, it’s your body and you are the person who needs to understand the plan,” she says. “It’s far better to be pushy than not know what to do to take the best possible care of yourself. It’s okay to say to your doctor, ‘Wait, I want to make sure I understand what you’re saying. This is important and I want to get this right.’” Make sure you write down the answers.

4. Bring a friend
   Because appointments can be a little confusing at times, it helps to have an extra set of ears to pick up on instructions and

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Staying healthy while using PPIs

Proton-pump inhibitors (PPIs) help treat symptoms of heartburn, but these powerful medications also carry their share of risks. “The risks are for long-term use,” says Dr. Jacqueline Wolf, a Harvard Medical School associate professor. “Three months of use should be okay, but if someone needs a PPI longer than that, a doctor should be supervising use.”

Here are the top four risks you should keep in mind when using PPIs, and how to minimize each.

**Low vitamin B₁₂ levels**
Vitamin B₁₂ is necessary for red blood cell production and brain health. It’s found primarily in animal products, such as meat, fish, poultry, dairy, and eggs. PPIs can interfere with the body’s absorption of vitamin B₁₂ from food, because stomach acid is needed to separate the vitamin from food. If you take PPIs, talk with your doctor about having your vitamin B₁₂ levels checked. You may be advised to take a vitamin B₁₂ supplement if your levels are too low.

**Fractures**
PPIs can also interfere with calcium absorption in the body, which in turn means weaker bones. Using the medications for more than a year or taking higher doses of PPIs increases the chances of a fracture. Dr. Wolf advises that you take a vitamin D supplement (600 to 800 international units), and a calcium supplement if you don’t get enough from food. The RDA of calcium for men ages 51 and older is 1,000 to 1,200 milligrams (mg) per day. For women ages 51 and older it’s 1,200 to 1,500 mg per day.

**Life-threatening infections**
Using PPIs may also have a troubling effect on your digestive system. Less stomach acid may make you susceptible to an infection with *Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile*) bacteria. *C. difficile* can cause severe diarrhea that claims the lives of thousands of people every year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. If you start to have watery stool that does not improve, seek medical attention promptly.

**The rebound effect**
If you experience diarrhea or any other side effect related to PPIs, you should talk with your health care provider immediately. But don’t stop taking the medication until you have that conversation. One potential effect of PPI use is an increase in gastrin, a hormone involved in the secretion of stomach acid. That hormone surge could lead to a dangerous spike in acid if you suddenly stop taking a PPI. “To prevent a symptomatic spike when stopping a PPI after long-term use, a slow taper off the medication is often necessary,” says Dr. Wolf.

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other information. Dr. Joynt recommends bringing a friend, spouse, or adult child to an appointment. “It’s not because you can’t make your own decisions,” she explains. “It’s because it’s just so hard to keep track of all the information. Having someone who can take notes and be your scribe can be helpful, because it can be overwhelming to hear news about a new diagnosis or complicated changes to your medications.”

**Bring medications**
Dr. Joynt says everyone should have a current list of medications to show the doctor, but many don’t. An upcoming appointment is a good reason to put your list together.

“It helps you get organized and helps the doctor understand what you’re taking,” Dr. Joynt says. “For example, your physician may not know that another doctor has started you on a new medication.” Include the names of the medications, the doses, and the schedule of when you take those medications. Include vitamins, supplements (such as calcium), and over-the-counter medicines (such as heartburn remedies). Dr. Joynt adds that you could also simply put all of your pill bottles and other medications in a reclosable plastic bag. That’s easier for you because you don’t need to write down complicated names and doses.

**Get a recap**
Before leaving your appointment, ask for a recap. “Ask the doctor to repeat the instructions you’re supposed to follow,” Dr. Joynt advises, “and make sure you’re both on the same page. Write things down, so you can remember what you talked about after the appointment.” Finally, be sure you know how to contact your doctor’s office if you have further questions. How are you supposed to let them know if the treatment is—or isn’t—working? How do you get in touch with someone?
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