

How to talk to doctors



Put aside white coat anxiety. Your loved one needs you.

When you're caring for an elderly relative, you may start to feel like a frequent flier at the doctor's office—even if you're in perfect health yourself. For many caregivers, accompanying loved ones to doctor visits a big part of the monthly (or even weekly) routine.

Showing up is a start. But your loved one may need more than a ride: They could use your help getting the most out of the appointment. Considering that the average visit with a healthcare provider lasts less than 18 minutes, you have your work cut out for you.

How to make sure your loved one's concerns—and yours—get properly addressed? While choosing to see competent providers with a good bedside manner certainly helps, here are five things you can do to help the doctor-patient-caregiver relationship go much more smoothly.

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1. Make sure you and your loved one are on the same page.

One of the best ways to maximize the time you have in the provider's office is to talk to your loved one before you walk in about what ought to be the main focus. "I have a limited amount of time, and if I have two people in the room who want to bring up two completely different agendas it may require a second visit," says Robert Arnold, MD, director of the Institute for Doctor-Patient Communication at the University of Pittsburgh.

If you feel the need to raise a touchy topic, consider reaching out to the doctor yourself ahead of time, suggests Jean Kutner, MD, an internist, geriatrician and chief medical officer at the University of Colorado Hospital. "I've gotten notes from family members saying, 'You're seeing Mom next week, and I'm worried she's not eating enough. Can you address

it with her?' That triggers me to say, 'So, Mrs. Smith, tell me about what you've been eating this month.' It guides me and avoids that awkward situation you have when a patient is saying she's fine and the daughter is in the background making faces."

2. Take lots of notes.

"All of us have trouble remembering what happened during a medical visit. And it becomes harder as we age and sometimes develop cognitive issues," says Kutner. "Caregivers can be tremendously helpful by taking notes and organizing the information."

Another option: Ask the doctor about [recording the visit](#) so you can listen back later, or share instructions with other caregivers to keep everyone on the same page. Just be sure to be sensitive to legal and privacy issues, and make sure your loved one is on board.

It's smart to jot down a few notes *before* the appointment, too: What questions do you have that you want to be sure the provider addresses?

3. Participate, but don't dominate.

As long as the person you're supporting is mentally competent, resist the urge to take over. "Remember that the appointment is actually about the patient and not about you," says Kutner.

Related: [Don't ignore your own health](#), but know that this isn't the time to bring it up. "If you have your own health issues or want to talk about how you're coping, it's helpful to make your own appointment," Kutner adds.

Is the doctor using lingo that's too complicated? Are you unsure why the treatment plan is changing? If you don't understand, ask.

Anytime something is unclear, speak up, says Arnold. Ideally the doctor should walk you through it. But if that's not possible you should at least be told where to go for more info—perhaps a nurse, social worker or patient advocate.

4. Do Google, but don't act like it makes you an expert.

"I actually love it when [patients or caregivers] do internet research, because it shows they're engaged," says Kutner. What doctors universally hate, however, is when a layperson claims to know better than the professional because they "read it on the internet."

If you do research, make sure you're smart about it. "You should be looking for [sites run by well-respected organizations](#), like the American Medical Association, major universities and medical centers," says Arnold.

Not sure if you're looking in the right place? Ask the provider to point you in the right direction.

5. Direct your questions to the right person.

[Wondering if your dad still needs that blood thinner](#) he started taking after his stroke 6 months ago? His internist or cardiologist should be your go-to. Not sure if it's OK for him to shower on his own? Talk to his physical therapist. She'll likely know more about his current strength and balance skills.

As for day-to-day quandaries about driving, [meal prep](#), and [living alone](#), you can try asking the internist—but don't be surprised if they deflect or defer to the patient (assuming the patient is of sound mind).

For extra help sorting out these issues (especially if you and your loved one have a disagreement), consider enlisting the services of a visiting doctor's program. They can send a physician, nurse or other healthcare professional to do a thorough assessment of the patient's home and ask detailed questions about their day-to-day functioning, says Christine Kistler, MD, an assistant professor at UNC School of Medicine who serves on the American Geriatrics Society Research Committee.

More helpful links:

- **Eldercare Locator** www.eldercare.gov
- **The National Clearinghouse for Long-term Care Information** www.longtermcare.gov
- **Medicare** www.medicare.gov
- **Social Security Administration**
www.socialsecurity.gov
- **Veterans Administration** www.caregiver.va.gov