

How to Talk to Your Healthcare Provider: Tips on Improving Communication

Good communication between you and your healthcare providers is essential to your health.

This can be challenging to accomplish in a short visit, especially if you're not feeling well.

It's important that you share all the information about yourself and your health that your providers need to provide quality care. And it's important that they explain what you need to do to stay as healthy as possible, in a way that you understand.

Here's what experts with the American Geriatrics Society's Health in Aging Foundation suggest to help you get the most out of your visit with your provider:

Before Your Appointment

Make a list

Write down your goals for the visit and the things you most want to talk about with your provider, and bring it to your appointment. Try to keep your list to the 2-3 most important items.

Also create and maintain a personal health record. Write down all your past and current health problems, and any surgery or other treatments you've had. Note the names of any medications you've taken that have caused unwanted side effects. Keep this record updated and bring it to your visit, too.

Bring your medications, vitamins, and other remedies

Put all of the prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, herbs, vitamins, and other supplements you take in a bag, and bring them to your visit. This way, your provider will know exactly what you're taking, when, and at what doses. This is important because some drugs, herbs, and supplements can interact with medications your provider might prescribe.

Bring pen and paper

Bring paper or a notebook to your appointment so you can write down what your healthcare provider tells you. If you have trouble remembering later on, you can look at your notes.

Consider asking a buddy along

A family member or close friend who goes to your appointment with you can provide information that you might forget or overlook. If you want to discuss something privately, you can always ask your relative or friend to leave the room while you do so.

Call ahead to request a translator if needed

If English is not your first language, you might try to find a healthcare provider who speaks your native language. Other options include calling your provider's office ahead of time to ask if they can get a translator or bringing a bilingual family member or friend with you.

During Your Appointment

Answer questions honestly

Answer all of the questions your healthcare provider asks you, even the questions about things that might make you uncomfortable, such as mental health problems, drinking, or sex. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. Your provider needs complete information to provide proper care and everything you say is confidential.

Ask questions and repeat back

Make sure you understand what your healthcare provider tells you. You need to—and have a right to—understand what your provider says. It's important that you understand any treatments your provider recommends, any risks associated with treatments, and if there are any other treatment choices. If you don't understand, ask your provider to explain. Repeat any instructions back in your own words. If you've misunderstood, your provider will realize this, and explain in different words.

Mention cultural or religious traditions

Tell your provider about any cultural or religious traditions that might affect your care. For example, if your provider recommends that you eat foods that your religion prohibits, or if you need to fast at certain times of the year, tell him or her.

Ask for written instructions

Ask your healthcare provider to put advice in writing so you can refer to the written instructions at any time.

After Your Appointment

Call if you don't feel better, have a reaction, or realize you forgot something

Update your personal medical record with any new information.
Review any instructions or advice your provider gave you.
Call your healthcare provider right away if:

- You have questions or don't understand the instructions you were given
- You don't feel better after your visit
- You seem to be having a bad reaction to a new medication