

Helpful Hints for Caregivers

Getting the most out of each visit to the doctor takes some knowledge and planning: knowledge of how the office works so you minimize the roadblocks to getting the information you need, and planning so that in the short amount of time you have with the doctor you get all your questions answered.



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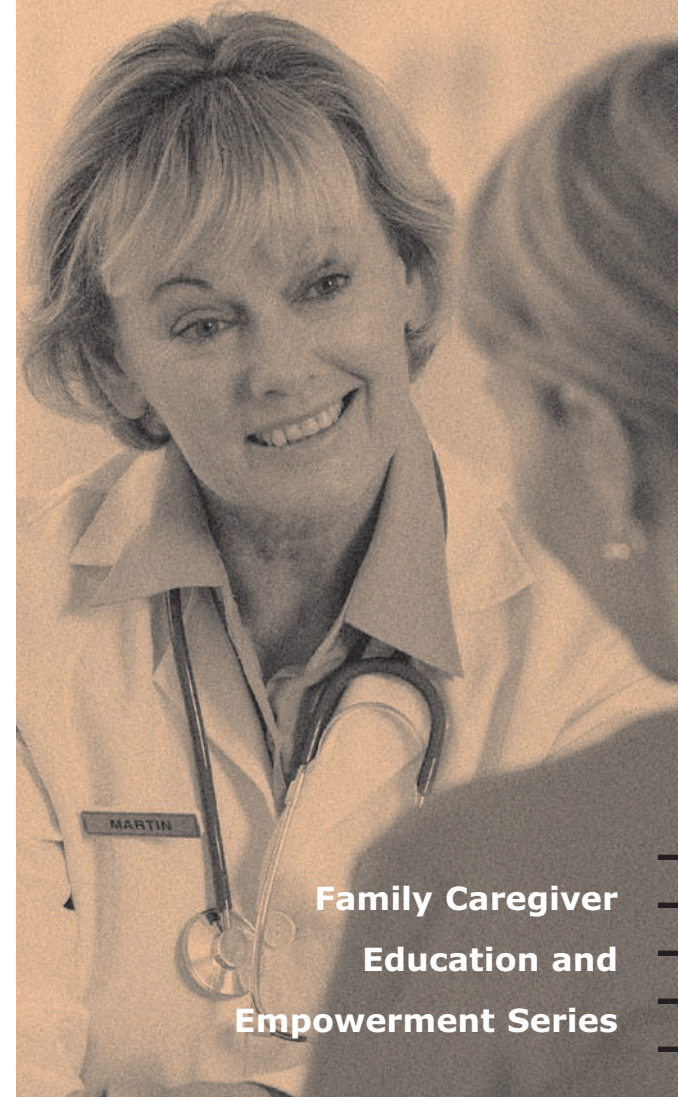
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Making the Most of a Visit to the Doctor:

*What Every Family
Caregiver Needs to Know*



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Learning How Each Doctor's Office Works

“You catch more bees with honey than you do with vinegar.” It’s an expression we’ve all heard countless times. It reminds us to be nice in difficult situations because yelling at someone isn’t going to lead to a positive outcome. When we are polite and consider the other person’s point of view, we have a much higher chance of success. The same philosophy holds true when we are trying to gather information, get directions, or understand a new situation.

Do you know the names of any of the nurses or administrative staff at the physicians’ offices you and your loved one visit? It’s good information to know. Research shows that people are more likely to respond positively to you if you use their names. This is just one of a number of things you can do to get the most out of a visit to the doctor.

Given that we now live in the age of anonymous recorded telephone messages, it is that much more important for you to learn how each doctor’s office operates. To help you get started, here are some questions to ask:

- What days and hours is the office open, and when does it close for lunch?
- What should I do if I need to reach the doctor after hours?
- Does the doctor communicate with patients and family caregivers via e-mail? How long does it take to get a reply?
- If I want to talk with the doctor, when is the best time to call?
- Does the doctor have a nurse or physician’s assistant who can be contacted when the doctor isn’t available or even instead of the doctor, when appropriate? What topics can the nurse or physician’s assistant help me with (test results, prescription refills, etc.)?
- At which hospitals does the doctor have practice privileges?

- In the event of an emergency, which ER does the doctor prefer we use?
- What are the office’s insurance filing and billing policies? Does the doctor accept our insurance? Who should I talk to if I have financial issues to discuss?

Ensuring a Successful Doctor's Office Visit

How much you and your loved one get out of each visit has as much to do with how much planning you put into it, and how much follow-up action you take, as it does with the time you actually spend with the doctor. Remember, you only have about 15 minutes with the doctor, so you need to make every minute count.

Before the Visit

- Write down all the questions you and your loved one want to ask.
- Record all the symptoms your loved one has experienced since the last visit and note any physical or mental changes during that time.
- Make a list of all the other physicians and healthcare providers seen, trips to the ER or hospital, and other health-related incidents that have occurred since your loved one’s last visit to the doctor. Bring a copy of this list to discuss and to add to your loved one’s file. If there have been big changes in your day-to-day lives, such as the loss of a job or a death in the family, let the doctor know this, too. These experiences are real stress producers that can affect health.
- Update your loved one’s medication record and make sure it is complete. If all prescriptions are purchased at a single pharmacy, you can ask the pharmacist to print out a list for you. If you prefer to bring the actual bottles of medication with you to the visit, develop a reminder system so you don’t forget to take them.
- If you haven’t received a confirmation call from the doctor’s office the day before the scheduled visit, call the office yourself to confirm the appointment.

During the Visit

- Speak clearly and succinctly. Having the written list of symptoms, questions, and occurrences will help you do this.
- Make sure all the questions you brought with you are answered and that you record the answers in a file or notebook you have for this purpose prior to leaving.
- Ask questions about recommendations, new medications, and other subjects discussed so you are clear about what the doctor has told you and what he/she expects your loved one to do prior to the next visit.
- Make sure you have all prescriptions for new medications and refills, and that you understand what each new medication is for and if it’s meant to replace an existing one or it’s an addition to the current medication list.
- Find out when and how to get test results and when the next visit should take place.

After the Visit

- Review your notes and discuss them with your loved one. Create a checklist of the things you need to do. File your notes from this visit with the information you have from previous visits.
- Fill prescriptions promptly and ask the pharmacist to determine if any new medicines are likely to interact negatively with current ones. Get a list of each medicine’s side effects and safety warnings if you didn’t get this list from the doctor.
- Note the new appointment date on your calendar, as well as when to confirm the appointment.
- Start recording information to share during the next visit.

With all the things you need to do each day, it isn’t always easy to plan ahead. It also takes a lot of control to be succinct during a doctor’s visit since the time between visits can be three, six, or even 12 months depending on your loved one’s condition. By learning how each doctor’s office works and following these simple checklists, you and your loved one will be much more likely to make the most out of every visit.