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Consumer Responsibility in Health Care: Improving Communication with Your Provider

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The U.S. health care system continues to undergo reform. The direction of change places more emphasis on the patient to be a responsible partner in his/her own care and for those for whom they are responsible (family members) for care. One of the most important skills consumers have to exercise in this partnership is communication skills.

Importance of Communication

As with any relationship, success with your health care provider is largely determined by how well you communicate with him/her. Don't wait for your doctor to provide the information you need. Take the initiative! Ask questions! Only you know what information is most important to you.

Make the diagnosis of your problem as easy as possible by sharing all relevant information. According to a study done by the American Society of Internal Medicine, the key for seven out of 10 correct diagnoses is solely what patients tell the doctor ("Doctor: can we talk?" 1999). This includes any recent changes in your condition, fears you may have about your illness, even what you expect from your physician. Prior to your visit, make a list of information you want to discuss with your doctor. Putting off care and limiting conversation with one's physician by either gender can lead to higher medical costs and debilitating chronic illness, since many illnesses are more easily cured up front.

Initiating Communication

Communication involves talking and listening. If you just started seeing your physician, or are still shopping for one, find a health care provider that listens and understands you. Getting that good fit can dramatically influence how effectively you give information and receive care. For example, if you feel a connection with your physician, you're much more likely to share important details on the level of pain you're experiencing, or in what circumstances your problem gets worse.

On the other hand, if you feel that your health care provider doesn't listen or understand you, you're less

likely to be forthcoming with the details that he or she may need to help you. This may be a signal to change physicians. Changing providers should not hurt anyone's feelings; it's not personal. It just makes good sense for you and your health. (This may be more difficult in areas where the number of health care providers is limited.)

Jump Starting Good Communication

One of the best ways to get off to a good start communicating with your physician is to have a regular physical exam. This exam will help in several ways. You will have the time and opportunity to discuss the health issues most important to you. It will provide a way for the two of you to get to know each other better.

Tips for the Best Consumer-Provider Communication

Once you've settled on the best health care provider for you, how do you get the best care possible from him/her? Managed care plans have placed physicians under increasing pressure to see as many patients as possible during their work day, and often dictate how long a visit should be ("the 15-minute rule"). It's up to you to get as much out of your physician as possible during whatever time is allowed. Here are some tips to get the most out of your office visits:

- To get the information most important to you, it is critical that you ask questions. Write down specific questions that occur to you between visits so that you remember them when you're with your health care provider.
- Come prepared for your visit. Write down the problems you've been having, and when and where you've been having them. If it's a first visit bring home health history records and your insurance card for completing doctors' information requests.
- Let your health care providers know what you expect from him/her from the beginning. Your specific questions at each visit will remind them of your expectations.
- If you have regular tests to be done, try to schedule them before your office visit, so that your provider will have the results and discuss them with you.
- If you don't understand the illness that you have, especially if it's a chronic problem, do your homework! Get more information from respectable, solid research-based sources. Bring copies of articles you have read if you have questions.
- Take a detailed list of medications you are taking. You may even want to take the bottle with you.
- Your doctor's time with you is limited. Chat for a few minutes, but then get down to business.
- Make sure you understand the instructions your health care provider gives you, such as taking medication, bandage changing, etc. Have him/her or another staff member write them down for you so that you can understand them.
- Once you understand your physician's instructions, follow them exactly! Treatments can be rendered completely ineffective by not following instructions exactly.

Remember, getting the most out of your visits with your health care provider is up to you. Good communication is a vital part of the process. By asking questions, making your expectations clear, providing essential information, and being an informed patient, you will make it easier for your provider to give you the best health care possible.

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