

How to Prepare for Your First Visit to a New Doctor

By Jack Stroh MD

It's the end of a long day of seeing patients and taking care of major health problems and I finally have time to sit and reflect on the day's events. I thought about what would make the day go smoother and more efficiently and realized that one of the more important factors in good health care is communication and a well-prepared patient. Most physicians cannot read the minds of their patients and must glean information on the patient from various sources. These sources may include talking to relatives, looking at old tests and charts, looking at the other doctor's office notes, etc. Also, you must realize that physicians each have their own style and way of doing things. Some physicians may stress some health issues more than other physicians do, either because of personal experience, educational background, or because of their level of keeping up to date with the medical literature. I am still amazed with how many patients who have retired to Middlesex County from "the Big City" will tell me that "I was healthy when I lived in Brooklyn but only got sick when I moved out to New Jersey." Their health didn't deteriorate in the suburbs, but perhaps their new physician picked up a problem that should have been found 5 or 10 years earlier.

Going to see a new physician can sometimes be a frightening experience. Establishing a good relationship with your health care provider is the first step towards building a trusting and lasting association. What can patients do to prepare for their first visit with a new doctor? These are some suggestions that will help you communicate better at your initial visit with a new physician:

Know your past medical history - If you can prepare your past medical history in writing, including any hospitalizations and illnesses in chronological order, this will allow your physician to better understand your medical background. Any hospital discharge notes or notes from the hospital could help the new physician ask you more relevant questions and get to the core of your problem quicker. Also, any recurring problems that have resulted from your past medical problems should be relayed to the new physician. Any fact, no matter how inconsequential you think it is, could be the key to solving your health problems.

Know your family history - What illnesses did your father, mother, grandfather, etc. have that contributed to their death and illness? What hospitalizations did they have? Did they have high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, ulcer disease, etc.? Did they have heart murmurs, fainting spells, die at early ages, or were they hospitalized for anything? Knowing "where you came from" can help your doctor determine where you are headed and allow him/her to help you prevent disease from happening. Don't forget that family history doesn't only mean your parents; it means your siblings and children as well (for instance, if your daughter has a murmur caused by mitral valve prolapse, this could alert your doctor to be on the lookout for something similar in you). Your physician will be alerted to treat your high cholesterol more aggressively if he/she knows that your father died of a massive heart attack at age 50.

Know your medications - As a consulting physician, I have patients who come to me because other physicians have struck out. I am asked to reassess their medical treatment, but the patient does not bring their current medicines with them. Knowing what medications the patient is taking is vital when mapping out a new course of treatment. Not all therapies require surgery or balloon angioplasty. Sometimes what ails you is in your own pillbox! Also, telling your physician "I take a blue pill, a green pill, and this capsule with a "z" on it" is not helpful, it is actually amusing! When patients forget to bring their medicines to their office visit I sometimes have them call or fax me a list of their medicines when they get home, then I call them back with suggestions. Of course, doing it right from the beginning saves everyone time and effort.

Know your test results - It is vital for you to bring to your first visit any kind of test results you may have, such as blood work, stress tests and EKGs, colonoscopy reports and X-ray reports, etc. How can your doctor know how to interpret tests he/she hasn't seen? What ends up happening many times is that the new doctor has the patient sign a release to get the tests from a hospital or another physician's office and then has the patient return after a month for a follow-up visit that could have been avoided. Being prepared is the name of the game! A piece of paper which you received in a doctor's office and which you may not understand may mean a lot to a medical professional, and may save you unnecessary and costly repeat testing.

Know your insurance responsibilities - Frustration is an understatement when you have waited 2 or 3 months to get an appointment with a specialist and you arrive at the Reception Window only to be asked for your referral (which you neglected to get) from your Primary Care Physician. It is your responsibility to know what your insurance company requires. If you do not bring your insurance card and required referral, your new doctor cannot see you. This is the policy of your insurance company. There are many different insurers and policies with each having different requirements such as co-pays, deductibles, and liability for the patient going "out of network." The patient's lack of preparation most probably will lead to him/her being sent home to wait for another appointment. Contact your insurance company to fully understand your benefits and requirements.

These are just a few ways for you to prepare for your first visit to any new physician. Establishing a trusting relationship with communication and knowledge will ensure both the patient and physician that the best possible medical care is being administered. Following these simple suggestions will save many headaches for you and your new doctor, and allow you to get excellent and informed medical care.

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