



The AGS Foundation for Health in Aging's

How to Talk to Your Healthcare Practitioner:

# Tips on Improving Patient-Practitioner Communication

From the American Geriatrics Society's Foundation for Health in Aging

**Good communication between you and your healthcare practitioners**—the

physicians, nurse practitioners, nurses, physician assistants and other healthcare professionals you see—is essential to good care.

It's important that you give your practitioner the information about yourself and your health that he or she needs to provide quality care. And it's important that he or she 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 Foundation for Health in Aging (FHA), suggest:

## Before your appointment

**Make a list** Visiting a healthcare professional can be stressful—particularly if you're not feeling well—and stress can make it harder to remember what you need to tell and ask your practitioner. So make a list and bring it to your appointment. Write down any health problems you have had or do have, and any surgery or other treatments you've undergone. Write down the names of any medications you've taken that have caused unpleasant or dangerous side effects. If you're sick, write down all of your symptoms.

And don't forget to write down any questions about your health that you might have. You can find comprehensive lists of questions that older adults should consider asking their healthcare practitioners – organized by subject – on “Aging in the Know” ([www.healthinaging.org/agingintheknow/questions\\_trial.asp](http://www.healthinaging.org/agingintheknow/questions_trial.asp)), the FHA's free senior health website.

**Bring your medications, vitamins, and other remedies to your appointment** Before leaving for your visit, put all of the prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, herbs, vitamins, and other supplements you take in a bag. Take them with you and show them to your healthcare practitioner. This way, he or she 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 practitioner might prescribe. They might also affect the results of certain medical tests.

**Pack paper** Bring paper or a notebook to your appointment so you can write down what your healthcare professional 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 with you when you see your healthcare professional can offer your practitioner information that you might forget or overlook. He or she can also help you remember what your healthcare practitioner says. If you want to discuss something with your practitioner alone, you can always ask your relative or friend to leave the room while you do so.

**Call ahead to request a translator if necessary** If English is not your first language, you might seek out a healthcare practitioner who speaks your native language. Other options include bringing a bilingual buddy with you to your appointment, or calling your practitioner's office ahead of time and asking if staff can supply a translator.

## During your appointment

**Answer questions honestly** It's essential that you answer all of the questions your healthcare practitioner asks you, even if he or she asks about topics that might make you uncomfortable, such as mental health problems, drinking, and sex. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. Your practitioner needs complete information to provide proper care. And everything you tell him or her is confidential.

**Ask questions** If you don't understand what your healthcare professional tells you during your visit, ask him or her to explain it. You need to—and have a right to—understand what your practitioner says. It's particularly important that you understand any treatments he or she recommends. You should ask if there are any risks associated with treatments, and if there are any alternatives.

**Mention any cultural or religious traditions that might affect your care** If your healthcare practitioner recommends that you eat foods that your religion prohibits, for example, or if you need to fast at certain time of the year, tell him or her.

**Repeat back** After your healthcare professional explains what you should do to stay healthy, or to treat a health problem, repeat this back to him or her using your own words. You might start by saying, "So, you're telling me that I should..." If you've

misunderstood his or her advice, your practitioner will realize this, and clarify.

**Ask for written instructions** If your healthcare practitioner puts his or her advice in writing, you can refer to the written instructions at any time.

## After your appointment

**Call your practitioner's office if you don't feel better, have a bad reaction to medications, or realize you forgot to mention something**

If you don't feel better after your visit, or seem to be having a bad reaction to medication your healthcare professional prescribed, call his or her office immediately. You should also call if you realize, after leaving the office, that you neglected to ask a question or provide information about your health, or didn't understand what your healthcare practitioner said. Ask to speak with your practitioner as soon as he or she is available or ask to speak to another healthcare professional in the office who can help you.

Communication between you and your healthcare practitioner is an ongoing process. The simple tips above can help improve communication. Improved communication means better understanding, diagnosis and treatment.



## Foundation for Health in Aging

Established by the American Geriatrics Society

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The Foundation for Health in Aging builds a bridge between the research and practice of geriatrics health care professionals and the public. The Foundation advocates on behalf of older adults and their special needs through public education, clinical research, and public policy.

The American Geriatrics Society is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of older adults. With a membership of over 6,700 health care professionals, the AGS has a long history of improving the health care of older adults.