

Communicating with Your Health Care Providers

A RESOURCE FOR VETERANS, SERVICE MEMBERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES

Having a primary care doctor can help put together all of your health information, make recommendations that are in your best interest, and guide you in making decisions about your own health care. Partnering with your primary care doctor and health care team makes you a more active member in your own health. Open communication with your doctor and health care providers will ensure you fully understand all parts of your treatment plans and are able to address any questions regarding your health. Here are some things you can do to improve communication with your doctors.



BEFORE YOUR VISIT

- Write down your symptoms, concerns, and questions, so that you don't forget to mention them. If need be, make notes on what seems to cause or trigger a symptom, when they are better or worse, and when they seem to occur.
- Think about what questions or concerns are most important for you to address in this visit. You may only have time to address two or three concerns so make sure you prioritize them before your visit/call.
- Make notes for yourself of the questions you want to ask the doctor – include questions about any information you have learned from sources other than him or her.
- If need be, talk to friends or relatives about the issues you should address. You may consider asking someone to come with you to help take notes and remember questions you had.

Consider use of My HealtheVet

at <http://www.myhealth.va.gov> to help better organize your health history, symptoms, and priority questions for your doctor.

- Bring all of your medications or a list of medications (both prescription and non-prescription) with you to your appointment. Any medication that you're taking, including medication prescribed by another doctor, should be included. If you make a list, be sure to include information as to the dose you are taking and how often (frequency) you take it.

AT YOUR VISIT

- Let your doctor know you have a plan for the visit.
- At the very beginning of your appointment, tell your doctor the concerns you want to address at the visit and what areas you want to focus on. Be clear. Listen to what your doctor would like to discuss and agree together on what you will cover. Remember that the doctor has a very small amount of time to meet with you and you may need to schedule more than one visit. Recognize that not all questions have answers—especially those beginning with *why*.
- Describe your symptoms or reasons for your primary concerns – this will help the doctor to focus his/her evaluation. Tell your doctor what you think is happening and why. Tell your doctor what steps you have taken so far to relieve the problem.
- Let your doctor know what other health care providers (primary care providers, specialists, chiropractor, etc.) have told you about your condition, prescribed to you, what tests they have performed, and ask if they want to talk with those doctors about the results. If possible, bring copies of any test results with you or make sure they were forwarded to your primary care doctor.
- Ask plenty of questions and make sure you understand the answers. Possible questions could be about medical care in general or about specific tests and procedures. Take notes during your visit. It may be useful to repeat back to your doctor what was said to make sure you have understood and that your notes are accurate. If it is a help to you, ask the doctor to write down information, especially medications or test names. You are entitled to have the doctor do this for you.
- Discuss with your doctor the different ways of handling your health problems. Sometimes there is more than one treatment or test option. Be sure you understand the pros and cons of each option so you can let your doctor know how you weigh them. It's also important to discuss what would happen if nothing is done. You may also want to ask your doctor about nontraditional approaches to treating your symptoms.
- Ask your doctor where you can find additional information on your particular condition.
- Make sure you summarize the agreed to next steps including when you next need to follow up or see your doctor.
- Learn the regular routine at your doctor's office so you are familiar with all of the standard procedures.





AFTER YOUR VISIT

Try the agreed-upon treatment or tests. If your condition changes or a treatment is not working, inform your doctor as soon as possible and tell him/her why you think it's not working. Work together to come up with the next steps to take. Remember, open communication with your health care providers is an important part of your overall care!



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **VA Caregiver Support**
Questions to Ask a Veteran's Health Care Provider
http://www.caregiver.va.gov/pdfs/Questions_to_Ask_a_Veterans_Health_Care_Providers.pdf
- **VA Caregiver Support**
Tips for Communicating with a Veteran's Health Care Team
http://www.caregiver.va.gov/pdfs/Tips_for_Communicating_with_A_Veterans_Health_Care_Team.pdf
- **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality**
<http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/beinvolved.htm>
- **National Institute of Health**
<http://nih.gov/clearcommunication/talktoyourdoctor.htm>
- **Family Doctor**
<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/healthcaremanagement/working-with-your-doctor/tips-fortalking-to-your-doctor.html>



TOPICS TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM

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