

Making the Most of a Health Care Appointment

Make the most of your doctor's appointment by planning ahead. Use the following tips as a guideline.

Make the appointment:

What kind of appointment do you need?

- New patient appointment- the first time you see the doctor. Takes longer and you may have to wait until a slot is available
- Annual exam- also takes longer. Let the office staff know if you have a health form that needs to be filled out at the appointment.
- Illness or injury - is this an emergency or can you wait for a day or so? Office staff can help you decide. Don't ask for an urgent appointment if it is not really an emergency. If the condition is life-threatening, go to the nearest emergency room.
- Follow-up or return appointment – this is an appointment to see if treatment is working or needs to be changed. It will be fairly short so if you have new problems to ask about, tell the office staff so they can give you more time.

Learn the office staff:

- Keep a record of the names of the office staff so you can ask for the person you need to speak to. Always be courteous to office staff. Get to know them and help them know about you.
- Who makes the appointments? It might be the receptionist who answers the phone or someone who only schedules appointments.
- Who is the doctor's nurse or medical assistant? Sometimes talking to this person can help you decide what to do.
- Who takes care of billing or insurance? This person can help you with questions about your bill or eligibility.

Prepare for the appointment:

- Put the appointment on your calendar so you won't forget!
- Be sure to bring your photo ID and your insurance card.
- It may help to arrange to have an advocate go with you to help ask questions and remember what was said.
- Dress so that it will be easy to prepare for the exam.
- Bring all medications with you in their original bottles.
- Arrive a few minutes ahead of time.

- If this is an illness or follow-up appointment, be prepared to tell the doctor your symptoms, if they are better or worse, if medication is helping, if any new symptoms have started since you have been taking the medicine.
- Bring a one or two page (back and front) summary of your current health. You can find forms for this under 'HRTW Portable Medical Summary' at http://web.syntiro.org/hrtw//tools/check_care.html?n=hrtw/tools/check_care.html
- Bring a list of questions you want to ask your doctor. Remember, if this is an illness appointment, the doctor won't have time to talk about other issues unless you make arrangements in advance.

Keep the appointment or cancel it at least a day in advance

- Doctors work on a very tight schedule. When you don't show up for an appointment, it wastes the time that was scheduled for you.
- If you cancel in advance, the office can schedule someone else for that time slot.
- Adult oriented offices may charge you for an appointment you don't show up for or cancel in advance.
- Adult oriented offices may refuse to continue having you as a patient if you miss appointments frequently.

During the appointment:

- Introduce anyone you have brought with you and tell the doctor what you want the person's role to be.
- If there is anything you need from the doctor or staff to make the appointment go well, tell them when you schedule the appointment and at the beginning of the appointment.
- Tell the doctor only the important facts. There is not enough time to go into detail that won't help the doctor understand what you need at this appointment. You might want to have a list or some notes to remind you what you want to say. This might be a good job for an advocate.
- Ask questions to make sure you understand the doctor's recommendations.
- Ask the doctor or your advocate to write down the doctor's instructions and make sure you understand them before you leave.
- If you do not agree, explain why you don't think the treatment won't work.

After the appointment:

- Keep a record of how the treatment works and your symptoms.
- Call the doctor's office if you have problems with the treatment or your condition gets worse instead of better.