

MAKING THE MOST OF A VISIT TO YOUR DOCTOR

This factsheet offers tips and advice for getting the most out of a visit to your doctor. It also lays out your rights as a patient when you go to see a doctor.

Key points to remember:

- » Make a list before you go, reminding you of things you need to discuss.
- » Note how long you have had your symptoms, what they feel like, and if you have noticed that anything triggers them.
- » Arrive early if you can.
- » Bring a friend, family member, or carer if it makes you feel more comfortable.
- » Be honest and don't be afraid to ask questions.
- » Ask your doctor if there is anything you need to do after the appointment

If you have a chest, heart or stroke condition it is likely that you will have to visit your doctor quite often.

Whether you are seeing your regular doctor for a routine appointment, or you have made an emergency appointment because you suddenly feel unwell, preparing for your appointment will help you get the most from it.

Your doctor is there to help you, not to judge you. Make sure that you ask any questions you have, and if you need help understanding, then let the doctor know.

Preparing for an appointment

1. Think about what you want

Once you have an appointment booked to see your doctor, it can be helpful to plan what you want to discuss before you go.

Think about what you want to get out of the visit. That might be one or more of the following:

- Advice on symptoms or problems you have been having
- A change in your medication, or starting a new medication
- Getting a diagnosis
- Checking up on your treatment
- Getting a doctor's note to back up work absences, or to support disability accommodations that you need
- A referral to another service or therapy which may help you

Or it might be something else. Write it down and take the note with you.

Remember that a standard GP appointment is only ten minutes long, so if there are a lot of things you need to discuss, it can be better to book a double appointment.

2. Prepare your information

Having your details to hand to share with the doctor can make all the difference.

Write down details of your symptoms: when they started, what they are, whether they have changed at all, how they are affecting your life, and most importantly, how they are making you feel.

List or take all your medicines with you, including vitamins and supplements, especially if you want to discuss a possible change to these or a side effect you might be experiencing.

3. Do you want someone with you?

You are allowed to bring someone to your appointment with you. This could be a friend, family member, carer, or someone else. If you are worried that you may not be able to understand the doctor, think you might forget what to say, or just need moral support, consider asking someone to attend your appointment with you.

4. Know what you need

If you have long-term health conditions, you may need support at your doctor's appointment. For example, a hearing loop, visual aids to help you understand, disabled parking, or a telephone appointment. You may also need a translator, particularly if you are Deaf or if English is not your first language.

If this is the case, call ahead (or ask someone else to call for you) to tell the surgery what you need and give them a chance to make any accommodations they can.

5. Know where you are going

Finally, it is important to know where you are meeting the doctor (especially if it is at a surgery or clinic you do not usually attend) and when.

Make sure that you know how you will arrive, and how long it will take. If you are using a car, check that you know where you will park. If you are using public transport, make sure that you have an up-to-date timetable. If you are asking someone else to take you, give them as much notice as you can.

Try to arrive in plenty of time, as you may lose your appointment if you are late. It is usually best to arrive 5-10 minutes before your appointment. Bring a book or something to do while waiting.

Checklist before your appointment

- ☐ Make a list of what you want to achieve with the appointment
- ☐ Make detailed notes about your symptoms and when they started. Be honest and as thorough as you can.
- ☐ Ask someone to come with you if it makes you feel more comfortable.
- ☐ Check that the surgery knows about any additional needs you have, and whether they can support you with them.
- ☐ Make sure you know how you will get to the appointment, leaving plenty of time before your actual appointment time.

During your appointment

1. Relax

Going to a doctor's appointment can be stressful. Try to remember that the doctor is there to help you, and that you will not be judged or made to do anything you are not okay with. Again, it may be easier to relax if someone you trust is with you.

2. Be honest about your symptoms

Your doctor needs to know as much as possible about your symptoms. This is where the list you make before an appointment can come in handy.

Describe how you feel, when symptoms have happened, and how it has affected you. If you have noticed that your symptoms happen at certain times or when you do certain things, tell the doctor that too. Even older symptoms which you have discussed with the doctor before should be brought up if there has been any change in how bad or how common they are.

Remember that doctors are not there to judge you. It can feel embarrassing to discuss certain symptoms, or to discuss how they affect you, but your doctor has almost certainly heard worse!

Checklist during your appointment

- ☐ Be honest about your symptoms. Try to include as much detail as you can. Use your notes as a guide if you need to.
- ☐ Listen carefully to what the doctor says. Ask questions if there is something you do not understand. Ask for written information if you think you may forget what you talked about.
- ☐ If you are offered tests, medications, or other treatment, make sure you understand all the risks and the process involved. Ask questions wherever you need.
- ☐ Before leaving, check your list to make sure you have discussed everything you needed to.
- ☐ Before leaving, make sure you understand what happens next and whether there are things you need to do.

3. Listen and ask questions

It is important that you listen carefully to everything the doctor says, even if you think you already know it.

Doctors sometimes use complicated language or fail to express themselves clearly. You should always be able to ask questions if there is something you do not understand. Do not be afraid to ask if you feel unclear about something, or if you have any follow-up questions.

If you are not confident that you will remember what you talked about, or feel that you may need more time to process the information, it is always okay to ask the doctor to write it down. They may also be able to offer booklets, factsheets, or other pre-written information to support your understanding.

4. Make sure you know what you agree to

If you are offered further tests or a treatment (such as medication or surgery), it is very important that you know what it entails. Ask your doctor about:

- What you should expect - what they will do, and how it will feel
- Any risks or side effects
- The chances of success
- For medication: how often you should take it, and what you can expect if you miss a dose or run out of medicine.
- For hospital procedures (e.g. tests or surgeries): how long it will take, where it will be done, and whether you will need to stay in the hospital afterwards.

5. Check that you have covered everything

Before leaving the doctor's office, check your notes to make sure you have discussed everything you hoped to talk about in this appointment.

You should also check with the doctor to see what next steps you might need to take, and what will happen after the appointment. You might need to make a follow-up appointment, go to the pharmacy to pick up medications, or something else. It is often helpful to write these steps down so you do not forget.

Questions you might want to ask at your doctor's appointment

These questions can often be helpful to ask when you are talking to your doctor.

Can I check that I've understood what you said?

Can I have a copy of any letters written about me?

What are the tests for?

How and when will I get the results?

What do you recommend and why?

Are there any side effects or risks and if so, what are they?

How long will I need treatment for?

Does it matter what time of day I take my medication and do I need to eat first?

Is there anything else I can do to help myself?

What do I do if the symptoms get worse?

What happens next?

Who do I contact if I have more problems or questions?

Where can I find more information?

Is there a support group or any other source of help?

After your appointment

1. Take notes

As soon as you can, it is best to write down everything you can remember about your conversation with the doctor. This will help you to remember what you discussed, as well as giving you something to refer back to in later appointments.

If writing is difficult for you, you can also use your phone or computer to make voice notes.

2. Consider next steps

Consider if there is anything you need to do to follow up after your appointment. This might include:

- booking tests or specialist appointments
- booking a follow-up appointment, either with the same doctor or a different one
- ordering a prescription
- taking actions recommended by your doctor, such as diet changes or doing exercises
- talking to friends and family about what the doctor has said

If you were unhappy with your appointment...

If you leave the appointment confused or unhappy, or if you feel that your doctor wasn't listening to you, make an appointment with another doctor in the practice.

It is essential to have good communication with your doctor. They may not always be able to help you, but they should treat you with respect and care. In exchange, you should treat them politely, remembering that they are just doing their jobs.

If you feel that the doctor's behaviour was particularly bad, or went over the lines of your patient's rights (see the end of this factsheet), you may want to speak to the receptionists at the surgery about what steps you can take.

Other health professionals who can help

Doctors are not the only health professionals out there, and may not be the best for the problems you are facing. You may want to contact any of the people below before or after looking for a doctor's appointment.

You may also be signposted by your doctor or nurse practitioner to another specialist. The availability of different specialist practitioners will depend on which surgery you attend, where you live, and which NHS board you are covered by.

All of the advice in this factsheet can also be used in appointments with these specialist teams, or with any other health professionals.

You can also find information and support online, especially through the **NHS Inform** website (www.nhsinform.scot). However, you should be careful what online information you trust, and always speak to a health professional who is familiar with your personal circumstances before you start any treatment or medication.

Some other health professionals who may be able to help you include:

Practice nurses

Sometimes a practice nurse can help you in terms of having a chat about any issues that are worrying you or discussing your medicines, lifestyle changes or help that you might need at home.

Local pharmacists

Your local pharmacist can offer advice on your symptoms or medicines that you are taking and advise you whether you might then need to see a doctor. They will also provide information about over-the-counter remedies.

Specialist doctor or consultant

You can also contact a specialist doctor or consultant directly **if you have already agreed this with your GP or practice nurse**. This may initially have to be done through their secretary.

Physiotherapists

Sometimes, you may be able to access physiotherapy teams at your GP surgery or hospital. There may also be a private physiotherapy practice nearby which has an arrangement with the doctor. A physiotherapist can help with injuries and pain, but can also help you to get back to exercise and activity following an illness or health crisis.

Mental health specialist

Most GP surgeries now have some arrangement with a mental health specialist, psychotherapist, or community mental health team. You will typically have to be referred to this team by your GP, but you may also be able to self-refer in some areas.

NHS 24/111

NHS 24 offers an out-of-hours phone service to provide help if your GP surgery is closed and you are too ill to wait until it re-opens. They can direct your call to a suitable health professional.

To reach NHS 24, just phone **111**.

Advice Line

Advice lines can be a useful source of information and support. If you have been affected by a chest, heart or stroke condition, you can phone the CHSS Advice Line practitioners on 0808 801 0899 (free from landlines and mobiles). You can also email them at adviceline@chss.org.uk or text NURSE to 66777.

Your rights as a patient

When you are talking to a health professional, you have certain legal rights which are laid out in the Patients Rights Act (2011).

Simply put, you have the right for all your care to be:

» Patient focused

All care should take account of your needs and priorities. You have the right to say you do not want a treatment, or to express what is most important to you in managing your health.

» Participatory

You should have a voice in your care, and be involved in decisions around your care. Your doctor should never make decisions for you without consulting you.

» Informed

At every step, you should be given all the information you need about your care. You always have the right to say you do not understand and get a clearer explanation.

» Consensual

You should always be able to say no if you are uncomfortable or dissatisfied with the recommended treatment.

Every patient has the right to feed back or complain about their treatment. If you are not clear on what the procedure for this is, ask at reception at the doctor's surgery or hospital where you are getting treatment.

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