

9 Questions Your Doctor Wishes You'd Ask

Despite their best intentions, doctors are like the rest of us. They misconstrue, miscommunicate, and sometimes just plain mess up.

"It happens all the time where physicians and patients see different things in a different order of importance," says Dr. Adrienne Boissy, chief of patient experience at Cleveland Clinic. While you may care most about preserving your tennis game or your ability to enjoy wine, your doctor may be focused on improving your pain scores or lowering your risk for certain complications.

"Doctors have the best intent, but that doesn't ensure they'll always recognize a patient's greatest need," Boissy says.

That's why it's important to take an active role when talking with your physician, says Dr. Ted Epperly, a clinical professor of family medicine at the University of Washington School of Medicine. "Asking questions is one of the best ways to ensure you and your doctor are on the same page," he says. "And if your doctor doesn't seem interested in answering, or you get a negative response, you need to find a new doctor."

Here's what experts think you should be asking your doctor:

1. What are the different treatment options?

Gone are the days when a doctor simply chooses the best course of action and dictates this choice to the patient. It really should be a shared decision-making process. One of your doctor's jobs is to inform patients of their options, and then you sort it out together. To ensure that conversation happens, you may have to ask your doctor about your alternatives.

2. What outcome should I expect?

You may assume your life will return to normal following a surgery or other treatment protocol, for instance, but your doctor may know the best possible outcome is a small improvement in one or two of your symptoms. If you knew what your doctor knows, that might change your decision to go through with a treatment. So it's very important to ask what type of medical and symptomatic outcomes you can expect.

3. Do we have to do this now, or can we revisit it later?

Doctors almost always have too much to do and too little time in which to do it. So when they meet with a patient, there's the temptation to be as thorough as possible with tests or treatments. But sometimes certain tests or therapies can wait. Asking, "Is this necessary now?" can help your doctor stop and consider if what he or she is suggesting is required right away, or if it can wait a while.

4. Is there anything I can do on my own to improve my condition?

Lifestyle choices like what you eat, how much you move or sleep, and whether you smoke account for 70% of your risk for illness and disease. They also play a huge role in helping you recover from an existing condition. Adjusting your lifestyle is often more important than taking the right medication. But many doctors won't suggest lifestyle interventions unless a patient asks. So ask.

5. What are the side effects?

There's always the possibility that what I do with medications could harm a patient. Whether that harm comes in the form of headaches or skin rashes or mouth blisters, those sorts of side effects are common—and are things patients should hear about from their doctors beforehand so you go into a course of treatment with eyes wide open.

6. How will I hear about my test results?

Often a patient undergoes an MRI or blood work, and then finds herself at home without any idea when or how she'll hear from her doctor about her results. The anxiety of waiting around and staring into the dark abyss of uncertainty is terrible. Hopefully your doctor will be explicit about how you'll get your results. But if not, you should ask.

7. How much will this cost me?

Modern medicine is expensive. And the sad reality is most doctors don't know the costs to you of the different tests or medications or therapies they prescribe. It should be a doctor's responsibility to be on top of the cost, but many only will be if the patient pushes them to find that out. If your doctor doesn't know, he or she should be able to refer you to an administrator on his staff who can help you find out before you commit to a certain course of action.

8. Should I get a second opinion?

Depending on a doctor's area of expertise, his or her insights into your symptoms and their causes may be very different from another doc's. For this reason, seeking a second opinion is always prudent. A good primary care physician will point you to the right specialist. It may cost you an extra copay. But asking your doctor who else you could consult for a diagnosis is a good idea—especially if you're considering surgery or side-effect-heavy drugs.

9. What questions haven't I asked that I should have?

Often a doctor and her patient cover "all the nuts and bolts" and technical aspects of an upcoming treatment schedule. But they hadn't discussed the emotional impact the treatment would have on him. So ask.

This article is not intended to be exhaustive nor should any discussion be construed as legal, tax, or financial advice.
