

How To Talk To Your Health Care Provider

(NAPS)—*Dr. Semla Offers Top Strategies For Getting Answers To Your Questions About Health And Aging*

Q: I'm 63 and have a lot of health problems. Often, after seeing my doctor, I realize that I didn't completely understand everything he told me.



Dr. Todd P. Semla, M.D.

How can I better communicate with my physician?

A: It isn't always easy to understand medical problems and how to prevent and treat them. But it's very important that you do understand what your health care provider has told you about your health—so the two of you can work as a team. I usually advise my own patients to do the following:

Keep asking questions: Ask questions until you're certain you understand what your provider has said, why your physician recommends a given drug or procedure and how to follow given instructions. Among other things, you should always ask if the medication or procedure causes side effects, how to recognize these and whether there are any alternatives.

Repeat what you've heard: After your provider has answered your questions to your satisfaction, repeat back the answers in your own words. That way, you can check whether you've understood correctly.

Ask for answers in writing: Ask your health care provider for written information about the health problem at hand or to write down basic information about it. Later on, you can refer to these notes if you forget what was said during the appointment.

Bring a friend or loved one with you: Some people feel nervous when they visit their health-care provider and this can make it harder for them to follow what their provider is saying and to remember questions they'd like to ask. If that's the case, consider asking a good friend or a loved one to go with you to your appointment and ask questions on your behalf.

Call with follow-up questions: If you get home and realize that you neglected to ask your provider a question, or that you need more information, call and ask for clarification. Don't guess; your health could be on the line.

Visit www.healthinaging.org: This Web site, created by the American Geriatrics Society's Foundation for Health in Aging, offers a wealth of easy-to-understand information about health in aging. Among other things, it includes a running "What to Ask?" feature (at www.healthinaging.org/agingintheknow/questions_trial.asp) that lists questions you may want to ask your health care provider about a wide range of health problems and topics. These topics include medication use, high blood pressure, heart disease, back pain, diabetes, osteoporosis, depression, anemia, nutrition, pain relief, sexuality, hearing and vision problems, and urinary incontinence. If you visit the site before you see your health care provider, you can print out the appropriate list of questions and bring it with you.

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Healthy Ideas

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Top Strategies for Getting Answers to Your Questions about Health and Aging. /// How to Talk To Your Health Care Provider

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10