

A photograph showing a female doctor in a white lab coat with a stethoscope around her neck, sitting at a desk with a laptop. She is looking towards a male patient who is seen from the back. The setting appears to be a clinical office.

A Prescription for Better Health: Resource Center for Patients

Enhanced communication with doctors helps consumers save time and money while becoming healthier

Physician shares tips to help patients converse more effectively with medical professionals

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There should be a steady stream of patient-physician communication, but today it's more like a intermittent trickle. With a shortage of primary care physicians, pressure from Medicare and insurers to keep costs low, and the need to offset the ever-rising cost of malpractice insurance, doctors are forced to conduct office visits at break-neck speeds. Patients can counteract the effects of this time crunch, reduce their health care costs and improve their health by communicating more effectively with their doctors.

In a recent study¹, medical students shadowed 27 physicians from northeastern Ohio during one day of practice and found that, on average, 20.1 patients were seen for approximately 17.5 minutes each. Another study published in the *British Medical Journal*² compared family care practices in three countries and determined that the average U.S. adult spends about 30 minutes a year with a primary care physician. That is nearly half the average in New Zealand and one-third in Australia.

Sure, these numbers are staggering when you realize how little face time patients spend with their doctors. However, it's not the length of time spent, but the quality of that time that matters.

All physicians have taken an oath to care for patients to the best of their ability, so when a patient doesn't communicate effectively and honestly with his or her medical professional, it can create a roadblock between the diagnosis and a successful treatment outcome. This can lead to failed preventative care and chronic disease management, which often results in sicker patients, and an increase in expensive, avoidable hospital admissions and treatments.

One of the most frequent problems that stems from the patient-physician communication breakdown is a patient's failure or refusal to follow a prescribed regimen, referred to as non-adherence. Sometimes patients don't take their medications as prescribed because of a simple misunderstanding or a complicated medication schedule, but it can also be a more deliberate decision caused by issues such as bothersome, unexpected side effects or a patient's denial that

1 Valerie Gilchrist, MD, et al, "Physician activities during time out of the examination room," *Annals of Family Medicine*, Nov. 2005. Available at: <http://www.annfammed.org/cgi/reprint/3/6/494.pdf>

2 Andrew B. Bindman, et al, "Diagnostic scope of and exposure to primary care physicians in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States: cross sectional analysis of results from three national surveys," *British Medical Journal*, May 17, 2007. Available at: <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/rapidpdf/bmj.39203.658970.55v1>

treatment is needed. All of these reasons can be spurred by a patient's lack of education regarding the disease state, the need for treatment or medication, and the understanding of the balance between a medication's benefits and risks.

Much of the non-adherence problem is due to poor patient education and sharing of information between those patients and their health care providers.

Consumer Reports National Research Center surveyed³ 39,090 patients and 335 primary care physicians about their visits. Among patients who received prescriptions from their doctors, 31% reported that their doctor didn't adequately explain possible side effects. In the absence of this explanation, many patients may stop taking their medications when they experience side effects and often do so without notifying their doctors. The medication benefits are lost despite the fact that side effects are often transient and can be managed.

Another common concern that arises when patients do not communicate with their physicians is that the information gap is too often filled by false or inaccurate information obtained on the Internet. In that same *Consumer Reports* study, nearly 40% of patients said they researched their medical conditions online. From the physician perspective, 41% of the doctors surveyed said their patients often showed up poorly informed because of bad information found online.

The economic and health costs of poor patient-physician communication and medication non-adherence are just as well documented.

A recent study⁴ published in *The Journal of Applied Research in Clinical and Experimental Research* states that approximately 125,000 people with treatable illnesses die each year in the U.S. because they do not take their medication properly. Moreover, nearly one-fourth of nursing home admissions are related to improper self-administration of medicine. It also states, in total, that 30% to 50% of all patients ignore or otherwise compromise instructions concerning their medication.

The National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE) report, "Enhancing Prescription Medicine Adherence: A National Action Plan,"⁵ reports that non-adherence causes Americans to lose \$1.5 billion in earnings annually; employers lose \$50 billion a year in productivity.

Even more astounding is the report's conclusion that non-adherence costs our country more than \$177 billion annually in health care costs. Of that number, hospital admissions represented \$121.5 billion (69%), and long-term care admissions represented \$32.8 billion (18%). Physician visits accounted for another \$13.8 billion (8%), and emergency department visits and additional treatment cost more than \$5.8 billion (3%) and \$3.5 billion (2%), respectively.

Enhanced communication between patients and their physicians may not resolve every patient's inability or unwillingness to follow their prescribed treatments, but it will certainly arm patients with the necessary information to make thoughtful, educated health care decisions.

When patients openly share their concerns with their physicians, discuss treatment options, relay details of side effects and follow their prescribed medication regimen, they provide their doctors with an opportunity to help them become healthier people and avoid unforeseen and preventable medical expenses.

3 "Consumer Reports Survey: Patients and Doctors Disagree On Some Essential Issues," *Consumer Reports*, Feb. 2007. Available at: http://www.consumersunion.org/pub/core_health_care/004153.html

4 Albert I. Wertheimer, PhD, MBA and Thomas M. Santella, BS, "Medication Compliance Research: Still So Far to Go," *The Journal of Applied Research in Clinical and Experimental Research*, Jan. 13, 2003. Available at: <http://www.jarcet.com/articles/Vol3Iss3/Wertheimer.htm>

5 The National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE) report, "Enhancing Prescription Medicine Adherence: A National Action Plan," Aug. 2007. Available at: http://www.talkaboutrx.org/documents/enhancing_prescription_medicine_adherence.pdf

Top Ten Communication Tips for Patients

Here are a few tips to help patients communicate more effectively with their physicians:

1. Make a list of questions and concerns ahead of time and bring the list with you to your appointment. Many patients suffer from “white coat hypertension” caused by anxiety when entering the doctor’s office, and they forget what they wanted to ask or tell the doctor. By making a list of your concerns and being sure to bring them, you will be a more informed patient and show your physician that you want to be an active participant in your health care.
2. Don’t avoid asking questions because of embarrassment. Doctors have seen it all – and they are there to help you. Bothersome symptoms can be a sign of a much larger, serious condition and, if untreated, it could result in costly hospital admissions and lost time at work.
3. Bring a friend or family member. Visiting the doctor can be a daunting experience, especially if you are battling an illness or chronic disease. Having an extra set of ears in the room can help you keep all the facts straight and ensure that you’re following your treatment regimen. A third party may also think to ask additional questions.
4. Don’t leave the office until you have all the facts. If your doctor diagnoses you with a condition and/or prescribes a new medication, ask questions and get all the answers before you leave. While the Internet contains a lot of sound medical information, it also spreads a lot of fallacies and bad advice. Don’t rely on the Web for an explanation of your disease state or prescription – talk to your doctor and, if you want to do some of your own research, ask your doctor where it would be best to look.
5. Don’t be embarrassed to question a diagnosis or treatment. We should absolutely trust and respect whomever we choose to care for minds and bodies, but doctors are human and they can make mistakes, too. If something doesn’t sound right or doesn’t address your particular situation, ask about it. Be sure that you understand why certain tests are being conducted and, if you aren’t comfortable with the situation, get a second opinion.
6. Ask your doctor about the best way to reach him/her if you have additional questions when you get home. Many people don’t communicate effectively with their physicians because they feel like they are bothering them or are afraid the conversation might require another office visit or fee. If you ask your doctor how you can reach him/her, you will likely be surprised by his/her answer. Many physicians use brief email and phone exchanges to communicate with patients in between office visits.
7. Don’t stop taking a medication if you experience bothersome side effects. Contact your physician immediately and confirm whether or not these adverse reactions are expected. Many people stop taking their medications when this occurs and, with certain medications, that can be particularly dangerous. In some cases, the side effects will subside after a couple of days and are worth waiting out, or can be remedied. Be sure to communicate these concerns with your physician and give your doctor the opportunity to discuss these occurrences with you or change your medication.
8. Keep a journal of your treatment experience. This will provide you and your physician with a detailed look at your experience and can help you both determine if the prescribed regimen is effective. Even if you don’t share this journal directly with your physician, looking back on this information can be a helpful reminder of questions or concerns you may want to voice during your next office visit.

9. Talk to your physician about your prescription costs and insurance coverage. By having these conversations, your doctor can help enroll you in discount programs or clinical trials with certain pharmaceutical companies, he or she can provide you with samples or coupons, or prescribe another medication to help offset the cost of your medication(s). Additionally, if your insurance does not cover certain tests or treatments, your doctor can consider alternative solutions. It's a doctor's job to treat patients as best they know how, so if you don't discuss these limitations, they can't help you resolve the problem.
10. If you're prescribed a new medication, follow the prescription carefully and completely. Your physician has made clinical decisions about the prescription and dosage for your unique situation. If you have concerns or questions, follow up with your physician right away. And, if you think the medication has worked well, tell your doctor that, too. Doctors want to know that treatments are working for their patients and your feedback may help other patients like you.