

Learn to be the MVP on your own health care team

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

The doctor knows best. In the not-so-distant past, that phrase pretty much summed up the relationship between doctors and patients, but times have changed. Today, in many ways, doctors may acknowledge that you, the patient knows best — especially in regard to your symptoms, health history and personal information. Your doctor wants you to become an engaged and informed member of your own health care team. But doctors are busy people, and a routine visit doesn't last much longer than 15 minutes. As an active team member, you'll want to score as many points during those 15 minutes as possible. Unlike football, however, that quarter-

Fact:
Half of all Americans have difficulty understanding their health information

hour doesn't come with timeouts, so grab your play book and plan your strategy in advance.

Pick your team

The American Medical Association recommends that you devote a lot of time and energy to finding a physician who's just right for your needs — a physician with whom you can have a lasting relationship. Once you have the names of several physicians, learn as much about them as you can, such as their credentials and qualifications. Some of this information can be obtained from your county or state medical society, or the American Medical Association's Directory of Physicians in the United States, which is available online and at most libraries. And don't hesitate to ask your doctor's office about fees.

On your mark...

Find out the basics. Does the doctor you've chosen participate in your health plan? Will your cholesterol test or chest X-ray be handled by a laboratory or radiology service that doesn't participate in your health plan? Where is the doctor's office? What time should you arrive? Where will you park? Do you need to bring your insurance card or a referral? Your doctor and her or his staff will appreciate the time you take to get organized.

...get set...

To serve you effectively, your health care provider needs information about you. Your preparation will contribute greatly to your doctor's ability to make a proper diagnosis, spare you from undergoing unnecessary procedures and speed up your recovery. Before you leave for your appointment, make a list of questions. Write down any medications you are taking, including over-the-counter drugs and herbal remedies. Write down all of your concerns and symptoms, beginning with the most serious symptoms. Your health care provider will want to know when the symptoms first appeared, how often they occur and how long they last. Also, consider compiling a family health history. The time you invest preparing

for your visit will come back to you in terms of extra time with your physician.

...go!

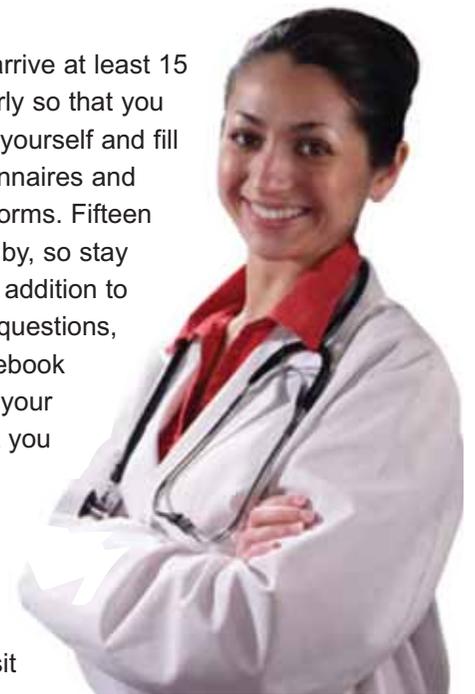
Plan to arrive at least 15 minutes early so that you can collect yourself and fill out questionnaires and insurance forms. Fifteen minutes fly by, so stay focused. In addition to your list of questions, bring a notebook and pen to your visit so that you can take notes. Bringing a friend or relative to a doctor visit can help you relax, and your companion can remind you of questions you forgot to ask or help you remember what the doctor said. Answer your doctor's questions accurately and completely. Be honest about your lifestyle, even if it means shooing your mother-in-law out of the room for a while. Listen carefully and speak up if you have questions.

By the end of the visit, you should have a clear understanding of your symptoms and condition, the treatment and medication options and the risks and benefits of each option. Be sure and make a note which tests you received, and follow-up with your health care provider if you don't hear back on your results.

Hit a homer on your meds

In any given week, four out of five adults in the United States will use prescription medicines, over-the-counter drugs or dietary supplements of some kind. Tell your doctor about every drug you're taking and don't forget to list any herbal remedies you take, whether it's Omega 3 or extract of octopus. Simply stated, being an engaged consumer means understanding what you're taking, why you're taking it and how to take it. Read labels, be honest with your health care provider and pharmacist and take your medication exactly as directed.

>> For more tips, visit www.ahrq.gov/consumer or www.familydoctor.org.



Stay in the game: Practice prevention

When it comes to your health, the best defense truly is a good offense. To keep your ball in play:

- Get regular screenings. A number of easy tests can help prevent or lessen the incidence of cancer, stroke, heart disease, diabetes and osteoporosis. Ask your doctor what screenings are right for you.
- Get regular physicals, including dental, hearing and vision check-ups.
- Eat a healthy diet and be physically active.
- Stay up to date on your vaccinations, including your seasonal flu shot.

And remember: When it comes to your family's health, you're not just the coach, you're also a vital part of the team!



American Public Health Association