

5 Questions People Should Ask Their Doctor (But Don't)

By Christina Johnson | October 31, 2014

Do you make the most of your time with your doctor? Whether you see your doctor once a year during your annual check-up or more often to manage a chronic condition, it's a question you might want to ask yourself.



Your doctor visits are your chance to identify good health habits, change bad ones and probe your doctor's expertise for new information that can keep you or set you on the road to healthy living.

To make the most of your limited time with your health care provider, physicians recommend making a list of topics you want – or should – discuss, including any new test results, especially if you are a new patient.

"Don't wait until my hand is on the door knob to bring up a new chest pain or recent fainting spells," one doctor pleaded. "Please wear your hearing aide, if you need one," said another. Sounds obvious, right? Yet, doctors say the obvious doesn't always happen and that can be to the detriment of your health.

Here are five questions doctors say they wish their patients asked them more often but don't. You may notice a recurring theme.

How can I reduce or stop some of my medications?

Your primary care physician may not be as gung-ho about a medication as you might imagine, so the next time you visit your doctor, bring a full list of all medications you are taking (over the counter and prescribed) for a re-evaluation of their necessity. Even if you shouldn't stop taking a particular medication, you might be able to reduce its dosage. Also, doctors say you should not be shy about asking if there are less expensive alternatives to your current treatment regime.

"So often, we focus on medications or specialty referrals that treat a person's symptoms now," said **Laura Greci, MD**, primary care physician and associate clinical professor of medicine, UC San Diego School of Medicine. "But there are simple home remedies, including exercises and other

lifestyle modifications that can really make a big difference in a person's health, both in the short- and long-term."

One caveat: Do not stop taking a prescribed medication without first consulting your physician.

"Some medications can be dangerous to stop abruptly and may need to be tapered," said **Jennifer Deconde, MD**, a primary care physician and assistant clinical professor of medicine with UC San Diego School of Medicine. "Make sure you talk to your doctor before making any changes to your medications."

Are the supplements I take worthwhile?

Mother Nature has inspired many life-improving, even life-saving, compounds and substances, but remember that health products and supplements marketed as "natural" are not subject to the same rigorous scientific scrutiny as prescription medications – either for safety or effectiveness.

"I recommend that patients ask their doctor about any supplements they are taking," said **Ali Mirza, MD**, a geriatrician and associate clinical professor of medicine with UC San Diego School of Medicine. "Many are expensive and unnecessary and are marketed to the public without any evidence-based science."

Some supplements, including herb teas, can also interfere with your medications.

Am I up to date on my routine health maintenance?

The medical equivalent of rotating your tires and changing your oil is to keep up-to-date on vaccines and routine screenings, such as mammograms and colonoscopies, as well as blood panels to measure cholesterol and glucose levels.

By keeping up-to-date on routine health maintenance appropriate to your age, gender and health status, you take full advantage of modern medicine and its ability to detect disease or risk factors for disease early. This gives you a jump start on successful treatment.

"Routine maintenance is something that a lot of patients forget about," said **Miguel Casillas, MD**, a primary care physician. "We often deal with the single, acute issue that brought a person into our office that day or maybe a follow-up for a chronic disease. The main point to remember is that it is much better to prevent a disease than to treat it, and if we cannot prevent it, then we need to detect it as early as possible."

What else could I be doing to stay healthy and prevent disease?

It's no secret that diet, exercise and other lifestyle choices can go a long way to preventing heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and even certain types of cancer. So don't hesitate to ask your doctor about your body mass index (BMI), alcohol consumption and other lifestyle factors, including interpersonal relationship issues which can affect health and happiness.

“My passion really is in educating patients on what they should be doing to stay healthy and supporting them in choosing to keep a healthy lifestyle,” said **Amy Guigliano, MD**, primary care physician. “In addition to making sure my patients are up-to-date with appropriate screening tests, I spend a lot of time talking about lifestyle. Many chronic diseases can be prevented or managed with a healthy lifestyle.”

Some elements of a healthy lifestyle, said Guigliano, include at least 150 minutes of moderately intense aerobic exercise per week; two days of resistance training each week; eating a high-fiber diet that is low in processed foods; keeping a normal BMI; getting adequate sleep and reducing stress, if stress is an issue.

“These lifestyle interventions may seem simple and common sense, but a majority of people are not doing them,” she said. “One of my goals is to help people make them a priority and regular part of their life.”

UC San Diego Health offers a variety of programs to help people eat better, lose weight, reduce stress and become more educated about their health condition.

“If I know that my patients are open to this extra support, I can guide them in the right direction,” said Greci, who sees patients in North County.

What’s next?

Come with questions. Leave with a plan.

“I’ve answered thousands of questions from patients during their visits,” said **Christopher Searles, MD**, medical director, UC San Diego Health Downtown Family Health and Wellness Clinic. “But, one question stands out for its ability to focus the visit on the issues that matter most: What’s next?”

“Patients should leave their doctor’s office with a road map for what they need to do, work on, or be aware of, between visits,” said Searles, who is also an associate clinical professor at UC San Diego School of Medicine. “For every diagnosis on their list, people should know what’s next in their treatment plan; how to monitor symptoms or side effects, especially with new medications, and when they should return for a follow-up visit.”

You should know what your doctor will be doing next, too. Will there be a referral to a specialist? Will your physician be reviewing medical records from a recent admission to a hospital and adjusting your health plan accordingly?

“By fully understanding what comes next, you and your doctor can work as a team to further your health,” he said. “The next time you’re at your doctor’s office don’t leave without knowing what comes next.”

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