

TAKE CARE!™

Self-Care
for the Family
Caregiver

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Making the Most of the Doctor's Office Visit

Part of NFCA's mission is to educate family caregivers. As an integral member of the healthcare team, you are your loved one's best advocate during any type of healthcare encounter. With that in mind, TAKE CARE! is pleased to provide you with some helpful tips that you can use when planning your loved one's next doctor's office visit. The following information is excerpted from the take home guide of the *Communicating Effectively with Healthcare Professionals* workshop, developed by NFCA. The workshop provides family caregivers with the practical information you need to manage communication among yourself, your care recipient, and healthcare professionals.

Visiting the doctor's office with your loved one can be a stressful experience, for both of you. The time you have with the doctor is extremely short and goes by unbelievably quickly. No doubt you will have many questions and concerns that you would like addressed during this time. How can you ensure that you get the most out of each and every doctor's visit? Whether the appointment is for a regular checkup or the result of an acute illness or injury, investing a little time and effort prior to the visit will help ensure that both you and your loved one are satisfied at its conclusion.

It Doesn't Have to Be This Hard

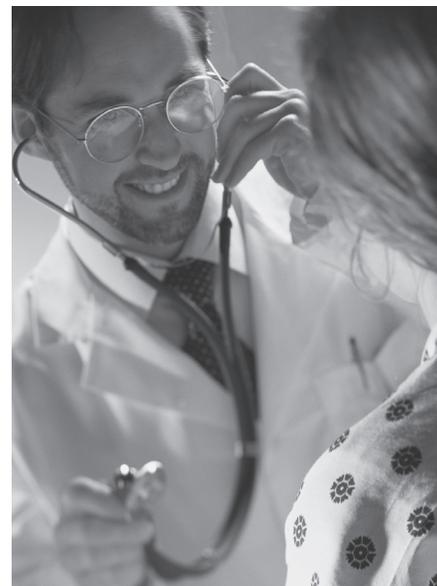
An NFCA Editorial

Caregiving is hard. How could it not be? The quality of life — and, in some cases, the life itself — of someone we care about is compromised, and we are playing the lead role in trying to hold things together. Caregiving will always be hard, but it doesn't have to be as hard as it is. Although it is difficult for many people to believe, what happens at the state and federal level has a direct effect on many aspects of our caregiving — even what happens in our bedrooms and bathrooms.

Let's take a look at Medicare, for instance. Of course, not all caregiving families are dealing with Medi-

care, but private insurers often take their cue from what Medicare does. That's why its rules and regulations are important for all of us. Medicare, like all insurance, is designed to reduce the payer's risk, so it tightly regulates how its money can be spent. There are many products and services that Medicare doesn't cover. If it did, our lives would be easier, the care we give better, and our finances would be in better shape, too. There are regulations that say what a doctor can and cannot do and what can and cannot be billed. There are regulations that say if and when our loved ones can leave the house and still receive services.

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Learn How the Doctor's Office Functions

You have probably noticed that doctors' offices seem to have personalities, just like people. It depends partly on size, type, and location of the practice. (You won't have the same experience with a 12-physician surgical group practice in a Chicago skyscraper that you will have with a solo pediatrician in a rural Minnesota clinic.) Despite all the variation, there are some things that

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The Doctor's Office Visit

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doctors' offices have in common. By learning how their office systems work, you and your loved one have a better chance for a positive health-care experience. Remember, these same tips apply to your doctor's visit as well.

Find Out Who Can Answer Your Questions

Usually, doctors do not have time to answer questions over the phone.

Most offices prefer that you start by talking with a nurse or a physician's assistant. These healthcare professionals may be able to:

- Make appointments.
- Answer general medical questions.
- Look up information in your care recipient's chart.
- Provide test results.
- Confirm correct medications and dosages.
- Help arrange for prescription refills, etc.
- Help with medical emergencies.

They also can consult with the doctor between patients and get back to you relatively quickly with answers to your questions. If you have complicated questions, however, don't be afraid to ask to speak with the doctor. The staff will help you determine who can best address your concerns. Learning the names of the office staff can go a long way in helping you establish personal and cooperative relationships.

Determine the Best Time to Reach the Doctor

Some doctors have specific hours during which they take calls or answer faxes and e-mail messages. If your physician is one of these, find out when this is and call during that time. If the doctor you are working with does not have specific "call-back" hours, leave a message with the receptionist in the morning. It will speed things up if the doctor has

some idea of why you're calling, so give the receptionist a one-sentence summary of your primary question. Also, leave all of the numbers where you can be reached at various times during the day.

Learn How to Deal With Medical Emergencies

Most doctors suggest that you go to the ER if you have an emergency after office hours. Ask the doctor if he/she has specific instructions for dealing with emergencies. It's helpful to get answers to the following questions:

- Who should you call after hours or when the doctor isn't available?
- How should medical emergencies be handled?
- Which emergency facility does the doctor prefer you to use?
- At which hospitals and specialty clinics does the doctor have practice privileges?
- If the doctor does not have privileges at the nearest hospital to you, what does he/she recommend in the case of an emergency?

Prepare for the Office Visit

Most people wouldn't dream of going to the grocery store without some idea of what they want to purchase. They check their cupboards and refrigerator and take stock of what they need. While taking your loved one to the doctor is definitely not the same as grocery shopping, it also requires taking stock — of your loved one's current health status and the reasons for the office visit.

BEFORE THE VISIT

Establish/Check the Patient File

The single most important thing you can do to promote clear communication and function effectively as a family caregiver is to create and maintain a comprehensive file of information about your loved one. All of your questions, notes, medical records, and instructions from healthcare professionals should go in

this notebook. (See the winter 2006 issue of *TAKE CARE!* for advice on how to put together a personal health record for your loved one).

When you are preparing for any healthcare encounter, you should plan to take this file with you. Before the office visit, quickly skim through the file to make sure it's up-to-date. If your loved one sees more than one physician, be sure that your file includes the latest physician notes or any hospital discharge papers that you have received. You may want to make copies of the pages that have important information so that you can simply give the doctor a copy.

Gather Your Questions

Before you and your loved one visit any healthcare provider, write down the questions you have for the doctor. You may want to write these questions in your loved one's notebook/file so that you have everything in one place when you go for the office visit.

Identify Current Symptoms

Think through your loved one's current condition before the office visit. Make a list that includes the current state of and any changes in your loved one's overall well-being. This list should include information on his general condition, including any changes in pain, medications, and emotional and mental well-being. If possible, share your observations with your care recipient. Ideally, you will both "be on the same page" in terms of what you are observing. If not, you may need to find a way to convey your thoughts directly to the doctor so that he/she has a clear picture about your loved one's situation. (See **Help With Reporting** below.)

Call to Confirm the Appointment

Scheduling mistakes happen. Physicians have emergencies. Because a trip to the doctor may be a physically challenging endeavor, and because you may be taking valuable

time from work or another equally important activity, it's wise to call the doctor's office the day of the appointment. Call a couple of hours before your scheduled visit, or just before you are getting ready to leave, to make sure the doctor is on schedule and no last-minute emergencies have popped up.

DURING THE VISIT

Help With Reporting

The office visit is for the patient, of course, not for you. Your care recipient should take the lead, if possible. If you are in the doctor's office during the consultation, listen carefully to what everyone says. If necessary, help fill in the gaps in your loved one's reporting and gently correct anything you believe to be wrong or incomplete. Legally, the doctor isn't even supposed to talk to the family caregiver because of privacy regulations. Hopefully, your loved one's doctor doesn't stand on principle, but, rather, compassion and common sense. However, just to make sure you don't run into problems participating in the visit if you want to, your loved one should tell the doctor (if possible) that he/she wants you to be present. It's best to put this in writing. (For more help on reporting symptoms, go to www.thefamilycaregiver.org and click on Education and Support.)

Describe Symptoms Accurately

It is best to start with what you think are the most significant changes and symptoms. Always be as clear and thorough as you can when reporting symptoms; details are critical when it comes to diagnoses and treatments.

Ask Questions

Go through the questions you wrote in your notebook and discuss them briefly with the doctor. Then write down the answers. If you don't understand something that comes up in the conversation, ask questions, and tell the doctor you need information

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clarified if you are to do your job as the family caregiver.

Record the Doctor's Instructions

Take notes about any changes the doctor suggests in treatments, home care, medications, and other things related to your loved one's care. These notes don't have to be extensive — just enough to help you remember clearly what needs to be done and why.

Discuss Recommendations

Make sure you understand the reasons for — and results expected from — any recommended medical tests, surgical procedures, or new therapies. Ask questions until you thoroughly understand what is going to happen and why. Have the doctor describe the potential side effects of a new medication or treatment. Don't leave the office visit until you understand.

Verify Follow-Up

As the visit winds down, ask when you should call the office to get any test results. If the doctor does not tell you when the next appointment should take place, ask when it should be and what to expect next.

AFTER THE VISIT

Review Your Notes

Look at your notes. Is there anything you don't understand now that you're home? If so, call the office within 24 hours to clarify things.

Check Prescriptions

Double-check that any prescriptions were filled correctly at the pharmacy. (For more on medication

management, you can request a copy of NFCA's pamphlet “Safe & Sound: Preventing Medication Mishaps” by calling 800/896-3650.)

Discuss the Visit

Ask your loved one how he feels about the office visit and what he learned. Discuss anything that will need to be handled differently as a result of the visit.

Update Your Calendar

Put the date of the next visit in your calendar right away.

Call for Test Results

Call about test results on the day the doctor's office indicated they would be available. Get copies for your file. If you don't understand something on the report, don't hesitate to have someone in the doctor's office explain it to you. Understanding test results when you first get them can sometimes prevent significant problems down the road.

As your loved one’s care coordinator, you wear a variety of hats. When it comes to the doctor’s office visit, you serve as your loved one’s voice when needed, you advocate on his behalf, and you are the one to whom the physician turns to ensure that the treatment plan is followed.

You can help facilitate a productive and satisfying healthcare encounter by coming armed with the information the physician needs, by helping your loved one communicate clearly, by actively listening, and by ensuring that your loved one complies with the treatment plan. As part of the healthcare team, you can help make the most of the visit to the physician’s office. ■