

British Lung Foundation

How to get the best from your doctor (England, Wales & Scotland)

Have you ever come out of your doctor's surgery feeling that you haven't got the answers you went in for? This information sheet aims to help you get the most from your appointment with your doctor.

Before you visit your doctor it is a good idea to think through all the information you believe your doctor needs to know, for example:

- when did the symptoms start?
- have symptoms changed?
- how your life is affected and most importantly
- tell your doctor how you feel. Don't be afraid to say what you think is causing your problem or making things worse.

Make a list

Write down your questions making sure the list is concise and clear. Prepare a copy to hand to your doctor so that you may run through the list together. If the list is longer than two or three points and it is obvious to you that you are not going to get through it at one appointment, it is possible to arrange a double appointment or another one a few days later.

Take a friend

Take a relative or friend with you if this will make you feel more comfortable. Make sure to ask if your doctor would mind more than one person being present.

Take a list of your medication

Your GP should have access to your regular medication but if you are attending a hospital clinic appointment you will need to provide this information. You should also include any complementary medications you may be taking.

Make notes

Listen to what your doctor says. If you don't understand, or if you feel that he or she has not answered your questions, do not be afraid to ask again. Note down important points in writing. Check your list at the end of the appointment to make sure that you have covered all the points you wanted information on. If you feel you still need to discuss your concerns, make a further appointment.

Other options

Remember that there are other health professionals available to help you who may have more time to talk through your particular problem. Most GP surgeries have a nurse, health visitor or even a counsellor who would be happy to talk to you about how you feel, about your medication or about any social benefits to which you may be entitled.

Changing your doctor

Sometimes people feel uncomfortable with a certain doctor. Do not be afraid to do something about this. Either discuss it tactfully with your GP or ask to see another GP at the surgery who may be more sympathetic to you.

Remember illness, through no fault of our own, often makes us a lot more sensitive to the reactions of others. Do not be afraid to say how you really feel - after all, you are the only person who knows.

Ask your pharmacist

Do not forget the pharmacist. The pharmacist dispensing your prescription either at your local pharmacy or hospital will be only too happy to explain any queries you may have about the medication, such as its possible side effects, the best time and way to take it and when the prescription should be renewed. Advice on general medical matters is also available.

Where to go for further help

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) - England

Many local NHS hospitals now offer a new service, the Patient Advice and Liaison Service. This service has been set up to support patients, their families and carers. It can answer questions, offer suggestions and listen to your concerns. It can help resolve problems on your behalf, explain how you can obtain your personal health information and can give you information on services, organisations and help groups. Unfortunately, this service is not available in Wales but you can contact the community health council if you have complaints or concerns about your care.

Independent Advice and Support Service - Scotland

The Independent Advice and Support Service (IASS) can help you with making a complaint about the NHS. This is a free service and available at a Citizens Advice Bureau near you. More information on this service, including information about your nearest Citizens Advice Bureau, is available from www.cas.org.uk.

Health Rights Information Scotland (HRIS) has produced a leaflet which explains in more detail how to make a complaint about the NHS.

Health Rights Information Scotland

Tel: 0141 226 5261

Website: www.hris.org

Community Health Council - Wales

Community Health Councils (CHCs) are independent of the NHS and provide a free advocacy service for people who want to complain about NHS services or an NHS practitioner. The advocacy includes advice on how the complaints procedure works, help in drafting letters and representing the complainant at meetings. CHCs are willing to take referrals.

CHCs will also provide advice for a client who lives in Wales and wishes to complain about NHS services or practitioners in England, Scotland or N. Ireland.

Contact details for local CHCs can be obtained from the Board of Community Health Councils in Wales.

Board of Community Health Councils in Wales

Tel: 0845 644 7814

Website: www.patienthelp.wales.nhs.uk