

How to help your GP listen to you

Before you make the appointment

- Ask yourself “How will I know the time spent with the doctor has been useful? What will have happened? What action will be planned?”

Booking the appointment

- Do you know which doctor you want to see or is it ok to see any doctor?
- Would it be easier to talk to the doctor on the telephone rather than in person?
- Does the surgery have a timescale for booking appointments?
- Do you know if you can book appointments in advance or can you only book them on the day?
- Can you book telephone appointments?
- How long are you prepared to wait to see the doctor?
- Would it be ok to talk to the nurse instead?
- Would it be better to send the doctor a letter or an email or a fax?
- Do you want a morning or an evening appointment?
- How long are the appointments? Most surgeries book ten-minute appointments for ordinary consultations and five-minute slots for emergency appointments.
- Can you book a double appointment so you don't feel rushed?
- If you think you'll have language difficulties, ask in advance for an interpreter.

Preparing for the appointment

- Make a detailed list of symptoms and how they are affecting your life.
 - When are things more difficult for you?
 - What has changed in the last few weeks/month/six months?
 - What did you used to be able to do that you can't do now?
 - How much help do you need to undertake ordinary tasks e.g. washing, dressing?

- How has your quality of life diminished?
- How much stress are you putting on the rest of the family?
- What are you most worried about?
- Are you in any pain? Try to scale it from 1-10. When is the pain worse?
- If you live alone, who helps you when you are not able to do things for yourself? How easy is it to contact them?
- What do you hope the doctor will do for you?

- Write all this down and make two copies, one for you and one for the GP to put in your medical notes. It is a good idea to send one copy to the doctor in a letter about a week before your appointment and tell them when you are coming to see them so they have time to chase any results you might be waiting for. Take another copy with you when you go to the doctor in case your letter has been mislaid or the doctor has not had time to read it.
- Make a list of questions you want to ask the GP before you go to the surgery. Take two copies with you so you can give one to the GP to keep in your records.

During the appointment

- Ask the GP to read what you have given them unless they have done this before you arrived.
- If you are apprehensive, give the list to the GP to read. If you don't have time to go through all your questions, don't worry. Make another appointment to continue the discussion. It is better to discuss one issue to a successful conclusion than try to have all your questions answered and keep the doctor from seeing other patients.
- If you are worried about remembering what your GP has told you, ask them to write down the most important points or draw you a picture of what they have been explaining to you. Try to make a note of the name of any medicines the doctor wants you to take or the names of people they want you to see.

- Ask the doctor what they are intending to do next about your care. Will they be referring you to another doctor/hospital/nurse? How long will that take? When should you come back and see them again?
- Ask them what they think you could do to help your situation?
- Try to remain calm and courteous at all times.

After the appointment

- Did the appointment meet all your expectations? If not, what still has to be achieved?
- If the doctor has agreed to refer you to another doctor or agency, wait a week and then telephone the surgery in the afternoon and ask the doctor's secretary if they have typed the referral letter. If you would like a copy of the letter, ask if it can be arranged. If you do not get sent a copy letter, ask the secretary to give you the name of the person they wrote to, when it was sent and any reference on the letter. Ask them if the letter was sent as an urgent referral or a non-urgent referral.
- If you have not heard anything from the hospital after one month, telephone the secretary of the person your GP wrote to and ask them if they have received the referral letter.
- If there is no record of it, ask them to contact your surgery and ask for another copy of the letter to be faxed urgently to them.
- If they have received the referral, ask them how soon you will be called for an appointment. If the waiting time for appointments is unacceptable, because of the severity of your condition, go back to your GP and tell them how your condition has changed. Ask the GP to make a note of how the situation has changed and ask them to send another letter to the consultant/department.
- If you have difficulties in accessing the service you need with either your GP surgery or the hospital, contact the Primary Care Trust Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) or the Hospital Trust PALS for help and advice.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service

To find the appropriate PALS Service go to www.pals.nhs.uk and search their database for your local hospital or Primary Care Trust. There are also PALS in the community and mental health services who are there to help and support you. They can also put you in touch with your local ICAS service.

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