

# Talking with your healthcare provider isn't always easy

## Who are the various healthcare providers in your community?

Various healthcare providers work together to provide care and support including:

- physicians/doctors, nurse practitioners, nurses (many in independent practice), pharmacists, physio and occupational therapists, dentists, optometrists, podiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nutritionists/dieticians, etc.
  - o They have different roles and are available to provide advice and/or answer questions regarding their respective areas of expertise;
  - o Availability of these various healthcare providers means better support and care; more professionals to provide care and to get information from as needed.

## What are some possible challenges/barriers preventing effective communication?

Communication with various healthcare providers may be difficult, as follows:

- Not knowing which healthcare provider to direct your questions to;
- Time with your healthcare provider may be very limited making it difficult to build trust or ask for help;
- You may not fully understand what is being said due to medical terminology, fear of diagnosis, feeling unwell, etc.;
- You may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed asking some questions or sharing personal information;
- You may forget to mention something that has been bothering you;
- Your culture and/or language may be different from the healthcare provider's;
- Previous experiences with healthcare providers that were difficult;
- Poor and/or slow communication between your different healthcare providers.

## What can be done to improve communication?

Good communication between healthcare providers, the patient and/or their caregiver is crucial to manage care and improve outcomes.

General strategies to use:

- Understand the roles of the various healthcare providers involved in supporting and caring for you - asking them if it not clear to you;
- Be honest and open with your healthcare providers and keep them informed about changes in your health, treatments, etc. The more information they have the more they can assist you;
- Take responsibility to keep track of your health condition, medications, appointments etc. Write things down and take notes during appointments (keep a diary) and request written instructions as well as copies of reports;
- Repeat what your healthcare provider said in your own words to confirm your understanding;
- Ask a family member or friend to go with you when speaking with your healthcare provider. This allows for emotional support and a second set of ears to remember and clarify information with you later;
- Approach a professional patient advocate who can assist you in communicating with your healthcare providers when needed;
- Understand the importance of being prepared for appointments or conversations with your healthcare provider. Preparation prior to appointments facilitates a more productive visit.

## Preparing for your appointment:

- Create a basic plan days or weeks before you go to the appointment;
- Prepare a list of questions and prioritize your top 3 in case time is limited;
- Call in advance to be sure that any recent test results are available for your caregiver to review with you at your appointment. Don't assume that they were communicated and/or received, and if not available, consider rescheduling your visit;
- Do research via the Internet by accessing CREDIBLE websites or support groups;
  - C- current and frequently updated
  - R- reference cited
  - E- explicit purpose and intention of website is known
  - D- disclosure of sponsors
  - I- interest is declared/no conflict of interest
  - B- balanced content- gives both advantages and disadvantages
  - LE- level of evidence is indicated
- Know your family history;

- Make a list of your symptoms:
  - o Physical (pain, fever, a lump or bump, unexplained weight gain/loss, change in energy level, difficulty sleeping or staying asleep, memory loss, etc.);
  - o Thoughts and feelings (anxious, confused, lonely, sad, etc.);
  - o Keep a diary and be specific, listing:
    - What the symptom is;
    - When it started;
    - What time of day it happens and how long it lasts;
    - How often it happens;
    - What makes it worse or better;
    - Does it prevent you from doing a specific activity;
  
- Make a list of ALL your medications and supplements to bring with you:
  - Note dosages and frequency (how much/how often) and any changes;
  - Note any new medications or supplements since your last visit;
  - Note any medications received elsewhere such as a flu shot, antibiotics, vaccinations, travel medicines, etc;
  
- Write down any medication allergies, sensitivities, or undesirable side-effects;
  
- Your pharmacist can prepare for you a list of your prescription medications. Providers prefer an up-to-date list that they can keep, rather than a bag of pill bottles. That said, patients should have an annual “brown bag” visit with a healthcare provider (pharmacist, nurse or physician) to review all medications including:
  - Prescription drugs;
  - Medical cannabis;
  - Over-the-counter (non-prescription) products including vitamins, supplements, herbal remedies, laxatives, eye drops, etc;

## At your appointment:

- Use the basic plan you prepared in advance as above;
- Bring other relevant things to your appointment such as:
  - o Health card, insurance card, names and contact details of your other healthcare providers including the pharmacy you use;
  - o Ensure that your healthcare provider has the necessary medical reports;
- Inform your provider if you use any assistive devices such as canes, walkers, scooters, hearing aids, reachers, grab bars, stair lifts, personal alarms, etc.;

- Speak openly and honestly about your everyday reality:
  - o Where you live;
  - o If you drive or how you get around;
  - o Your diet, alcohol consumption, smoking habits;
  - o Your sleep pattern;
  - o Activities you enjoy and do on a regular basis;
  - o What your sex life is like if applicable;
  - o Your personal goals and your plans to achieve them;
- Don't forget to mention any significant life changes such as divorce, death of a loved one, a recent move, etc. Be comprehensive, not overly detailed.
- Remember to share any other medical encounters you have had:
  - o Any emergency room visits? Discharge notes?
  - o Hospital admission? Discharge summary?
  - o Appointments with other healthcare providers since your last visit (names, dates, reports);
- Ask each healthcare provider to communicate the visit's outcome with other providers in your circle of care;
- Don't be rushed to understand- make a second appointment to ask more questions or receive more information.

## References

1. Making the Most of Your Appointment  
<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthtopics/content.asp?hwid=hw226888>
2. Tips for Talking with your Healthcare Provider  
[http://www.virtualhospice.ca/en\\_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home/Topics/Topics/Communication/Tips+for+Talking+with+Your+Health+Care+Providers.aspx](http://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home/Topics/Topics/Communication/Tips+for+Talking+with+Your+Health+Care+Providers.aspx)
3. How can I communicate effectively? <http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/navigate-healthcare-system/how-can-i-communicate-effectively>
4. Find a Professional Patient Advocate <http://advconnection.com/>