

Communication: A Prescription for Better Health

One of the keys to maintaining good health is good communication between patients and their practitioners. It sounds simple, but research shows that as many as half of adults in the United States have problems understanding information about their health.

This misunderstanding can occur for several reasons. Often, health care professionals use scientific terms that patients may not know. For example, you may use the word “stomachache” to describe how you feel, and your doctor may use the more scientific term, “gastroenteritis”. What’s more, the amount of information patients receive during a medical appointment can be overwhelming. Still other times, patients report they cannot remember what their doctor has said once they leave the office.

The good news is that – regardless of the cause – there are many simple steps you can follow to help improve communication between you and your doctor:

- **Make a list.** Before you go to the doctor’s office, write down any questions or concerns you have about your health and take it with you to the appointment.
- **Ask for definitions.** If your doctor uses a word you do not understand, ask him or her to re-explain using plain language. It is okay to say you don’t understand.
- **Do the talking.** After your doctor has finished explaining something to you, explain it back to your doctor. This will help you remember the information and ensure a common understanding.
- **Picture it.** A picture can be worth a thousand words. Ask your doctor to draw a picture or give you an illustration of the concept he or she is talking about.
- **Consider taking a partner.** Bringing a trusted family member or friend can be a big help when it comes to understanding information and remembering instructions once back at home.
- **Ask for a recap.** At the end of your appointment, ask your doctor to repeat the main points and write down take-home instructions.

Health care is a team effort. Make your doctor a partner in your health with open communication. This is your health, and it is important that you understand how to maintain it.