

Talk About Illness and Medicine – Video

In this lesson, you can learn how to talk about illness, medicine and healthcare in English.

You'll learn how to deal with a visit to the doctor's

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/going-to-the-doctor>) office, how to talk about different healthcare systems, how to talk about going to hospital, and more.

1. At the Doctor's Office

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Woman-blood-pressure-doctors-office.webp>)

Oli: So, what can I do for you today?

Stephanie: Well, I've been having these headaches, just behind my eyes.

O: How long have you been having them?

S: For about a week now. They aren't constant—they come and go, but they're really painful.

O: Do you have a fever?

S: No, I don't think so.

O: Any respiratory symptoms?

S: How do you mean?

O: For example, do you have a blocked nose, a sore throat, a cough, or anything like that?

S: No, nothing like that.

O: Is this the first time you've had a problem like this?

S: As far as I can remember, yes.

O: OK, please sit on the bed over here. I need to check your pulse and blood pressure. I'll also need to check your lymph nodes to see if they're swollen.

In the dialogue, the doctor asked many questions. Can you remember any? Typically, the doctor will ask about your symptoms, your medical history, and about medication which you're taking.

To ask about your symptoms (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symptom>), the doctor might ask

Do you have a fever?

Do you have a cough?

Do you have a sore throat?

The doctor might ask more questions about a specific symptom. For example:

How long have you been feeling like this?

Is this the first time you've had a problem like this?

How severe is the pain?

If you're describing your symptoms, it's common to use the present perfect tense (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/present-perfect-verb-tense>), especially for a problem that appears repeatedly. For example:

I've been having really bad headaches.
I've been having some stomach problems.
I've been having a lot of problems getting to sleep.

You could also add a time period, as in:

I've had this cough for a week now.

To describe more stable symptoms, use the present simple tense (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/present-simple-verb-tense>). For example:

I have a swelling in my right knee.
I have this rash on my arm.

After you describe your symptoms, the doctor might do some basic checks on you. For example, he or she might take your pulse, check your blood pressure, or listen to your heartbeat or breathing using a stethoscope.

For the next point to talk about illness in English, the doctor will suggest further treatment, and possibly prescribe medicine for you to take.

2. Prescribing Medicine and Giving Advice

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/medical-doctor-1314902-m.webp>)

Oli: Are you taking any medication currently?

Stephanie: No, nothing.

O: Any allergies?

S: No.

O: I'm going to prescribe you some painkillers. Take one as soon as you feel your headaches starting. If you're still in pain after an hour, take a second one. Don't take more than two pills in four hours, or more than six pills in a 24-hour period.

S: OK...

O: Also, don't drink alcohol or take any other anti-inflammatories while you're taking these.

S: Can't you do some more tests? What if it's something more serious?

O: If you're still having the same problem in two weeks, then we'll need to investigate further. These things often clear up by themselves. You should also make sure you get enough sleep, stay hydrated, and avoid stress if possible.

S: Do I have to pay for the prescription?

O: You pay a seven-pound prescription fee. I'm giving you enough pills to last four weeks, so you should have enough.

S: Can I take it to any chemist's?

O: Yes, of course. There's a pharmacy in the supermarket around the corner. You could get your medicine there.

S: OK, I'll do that. Thank you.

Doctors can prescribe you medicine or other treatments. They do this by writing what you need on a piece of paper—a prescription. ‘Prescribe’ is the verb, and ‘prescription’ is the noun. You can also use the noun ‘prescription’ to refer to the medicine which a doctor prescribes for you.

For example, you could say:

The doctor prescribed antihistamines, but they didn't help.

I lost my prescription, so I'll have to call the doctor and see if she can send me a replacement.

Antihistamines are often taken by people who have allergies. In the dialogue, do you remember what kind of medicine the doctor prescribed? He prescribed painkillers. Common painkillers are paracetamol and ibuprofen. Painkillers may also be anti-inflammatories—they reduce fever and swelling.

After you have your prescription, you can collect your medicine from a pharmacy—also called a chemist's in UK English, although both words are used. The doctor or pharmacist might also give you advice on how to take your medicine. For example:

Take one pill every twelve hours.

Make sure you take the pills with food.

Avoid alcohol while you're taking these, or they might not be as effective.

Finally, the doctor might also give you some more general advice. In the dialogue, the doctor mentioned three things. Do you remember them? He said:

You should also make sure you get enough sleep, stay hydrated, and avoid stress if possible.

Last question for this section: what happens if you don't stay hydrated? If you don't stay hydrated by drinking enough fluids, you'll get dehydrated.

Next, let's look at ways to talk about illness in English using phrases if you aren't sure where to go or how to get medical help.

3. Describing How Healthcare Systems Work

Stephanie: So, weird question, but what do I do if I need to see a doctor? I've never been to hospital or anything here, and I have no idea how it works.

Oli: You have insurance?

S: No.

O: No? Anyway, what's wrong with you?

S: Nothing much. I have this swelling in my wrist, and it's a little uncomfortable to move it. I'd just like to get it checked out.

O: Well, you could go to a public hospital. I think as a resident you're entitled to free public healthcare, but even if you have to pay, it won't be much. You might have to wait for a long time, though.

S: You mean, you have to wait to see a doctor?

O: Yes, that too, but I meant that after you see a doctor, it might be a long time before you get any treatment. From what I hear, the public health system is really overstretched at the moment, and people have to wait weeks or months for treatment.

S: So, you have private health insurance?

O: Yeah, most people do. You could also go to a private clinic, or just go to a GP and let him or her refer you to the right specialist if you need further treatment.

S: Would that be very expensive?

O: A GP appointment normally costs about 40 or 50 Euros. For further treatment, it depends what you need, obviously. Of course, if you're uninsured, it'll be more expensive, but it's not likely to be ridiculous.

S: Maybe I'll do that, then. I'd prefer to get it looked at sooner. Can you recommend anyone?

O: I can give you the details for my GP. There's also a website I can show you where you can find a doctor closer to where you live, if you like.

S: That sounds great. Thanks.

In your country, if you need to see a doctor, what do you do first? Can you go directly to a hospital, or do you need to go to a GP or smaller clinic first? Let's take the UK as an example. Most people in the UK use public healthcare, which is almost completely free. Some people choose to buy private insurance, which can give you more choice about where and when you get treatment.

If you're using public healthcare, you'll generally register with a GP. 'GP' stands for 'general practitioner', meaning a doctor who doesn't specialise in one area. GPs mostly work in small clinics, not in hospitals. If you have a problem, you'll go to your GP first. Your GP will then help you to arrange further treatment if you need it. For example, your GP might refer you to a specialist if you need more targeted treatment.

In other countries, most people have healthcare insurance. In some places, healthcare can be very expensive if you're uninsured. What about in your country?

Look at three questions:

1. Do most people use public healthcare, or is it more usual to buy private health insurance?
2. Is public healthcare high-quality and reliable? Why or why not?
3. Are all residents entitled to free public healthcare, or are there restrictions?

Could you answer these questions? Try it! Say an answer out loud, or write it down. Or, do both!

Remember that you might need to repeat and practise your answer several times, so that it is fluent and clear.

Did you do it? If so, feel free to share your answers with other learners in the comments.

Let's move on to another topic to talk about illness and medicine in English. What happens if you have a more serious health issue, and you need to stay in hospital?

4. Staying in Hospital

(<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/doctor.webp>)

S: Stephanie: Have you heard about what happened to Louis?

O: Oli: No, what?

S: S: He went to the doctor's for a routine check-up, and they discovered he had a major cardiac problem. They sent him to A&E right away; they wouldn't let him go home even for an hour. Then, he had surgery the same day.

O: O: No way! I saw him on Tuesday. He looked absolutely fine.

S: S: Yeah, I was shocked, too. Anyway, we should go and see him, don't you think? He would probably appreciate some company.

O: O: Sure... How long are they keeping him in?

S: S: From what I heard, they want to monitor him for a few days, and then he can go home.

O: O: So, when can we go? Do they have set visiting hours?

S: S: Yeah, it's in the afternoon some time. I can check on their website. Let me check with his wife, too, because I'm sure she'll be spending time there, and I think there's a two-visitor maximum.

O: O: I hope he's alright. I've never had an operation or had to stay overnight in hospital, but I imagine it's fairly miserable.

S: S: Yup, you're not wrong. Hopefully he'll be discharged soon.

O: O: We should take him some fruit or something nice to eat. Can we do that?

S: S: I think so, but I'll check to be sure.

Look at a sentence from the dialogue: 'They sent him to A&E right away.' Do you know what 'A&E' means? A&E stands for 'accident and emergency'. It's the hospital department where you go if you have a serious medical issue. In American English it's commonly called 'ER'—'emergency room'.

Let's look at four more sentences from the dialogue. In each sentence, there's a word missing. Can you remember the missing words? If not, you can also go back and review the dialogue to find them, if you want!

How long are they _____ him in?

Do they have set _____ hours?

I've never had to stay _____ in hospital.

Hopefully he'll be _____ soon.

Did you find the missing words? Let's look.

*How long are they **keeping** him in?*

*Do they have set **visiting** hours?*

I've never had to stay overnight in hospital.

Hopefully he'll be discharged soon.

'How long are they keeping him in?' means 'How long will he have to stay in hospital?' 'They' here refers to the hospital staff. Hospitals have visiting hours, when you can go and spend time with your friends and relatives who are staying there. Even if you need to go to hospital, you might be an outpatient, meaning that you go to hospital, do what you need, and then go home again.

The opposite is 'inpatient', meaning that you need to stay overnight. When you're ready to leave hospital and go home, they discharge you. You can discharge yourself earlier, but your doctors might try to persuade you to stay longer.

Now, let's look at our final section to talk about illness and medicine in English: recovering from a health problem.

5. Talking About Recovery

Oli: So, how are you feeling?

Stephanie: Quite fragile, to be honest. I mean, I feel better than I did, but it's a long process.

O: Well, that's to be expected. You had a major operation. How long do they say it'll take to recover?

S: They don't give exact answers to things like that. I guess every case is different, but they said I should be back to normal in around three months.

O: Three months?!

S: Obviously I won't be like this for three months, or at least I hope not. I get tired so easily right now. They told me I should get some strength back in a couple of weeks.

O: Do you have to go back in for any more tests?

S: I have to go tomorrow to get the incision cleaned and dressed. It's a big wound, so that'll take a while to heal just by itself. Apart from that, I think I have to go back in a month or so for an ECG (<https://www.webmd.com/heart-disease/electrocardiogram-ekgs#1>). Maybe there's more, but I'm not focusing on that right now. One day at a time!

O: Do you need any help with anything? Please ask if you do. I'd love to help if I can.

S: That's kind of you! If you want, you could take me for a walk. I'm not supposed to go outside by myself, but it's nice to get some fresh air. I start going crazy if I'm just stuck in bed or at home all day.

O: Sure, how about tomorrow?

S: That would be great! Come by any time.

When we talk about illness in English, we also have to talk about recovery! Let's look at some language you heard in the dialogue.

I'm feeling quite fragile.

I should get some strength back in a couple of weeks.

It's a big wound, so that'll take time to heal just by itself.

One day at a time!

Do you remember how this language was used? Could you explain what these sentences mean? Remember, you can pause the video to think, or go back and review the dialogue if you need to.

'Fragile' is similar to weak. It's often used to describe things which break easily, like china plates or things made of glass. If you're feeling fragile, you feel weak and ill. If you're recovering from a serious illness or an operation, you'll need to get your strength back.

You also heard the phrase 'get back to normal'. For example:

It'll take a few weeks to get back to normal.

A wound is an opening or a cut in your skin. If you have an operation, the surgeon will need to make an opening in your skin, which needs to heal afterwards.

Finally, 'one day at a time (<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/take+it+one+day+at+a+time>)' is a phrase which means you focus on the present, rather than thinking about the future. You can use it when you're dealing with a difficult or complex situation. You can also use the longer phrase 'take things one day at a time.' For example:

Everything's so busy right now. I can't make plans for next year. I'm just taking things one day at a time.

Of course, we hope you don't need the language you've seen in this lesson. But, we still hope you learned some useful phrases to talk about illness and medicine in English in this Oxford Online English lesson!

Thanks for watching!