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Discussing Health Decisions with Your Doctor

Ask About Different Treatment Options

You will benefit most from a treatment when you know what is happening and are involved in making decisions. Make sure you understand what your treatment involves and what it will or will not do. Have the doctor give you directions in writing and [feel free to ask questions](#). For example: *“What are the pros and cons of having surgery at this stage?”* or *“Do I have any other choices?”*

5 Ways to Make the Most of Your Doctor Visit



If your doctor suggests a treatment that makes you uncomfortable, ask if there are other treatments that might work. If [cost is a concern](#), ask the doctor if less expensive choices are available. The doctor can work with you to develop a treatment plan that meets your needs.

Here are some things to remember when deciding on a treatment:

- **Discuss different treatment choices.** There are different ways to manage many health conditions, especially chronic conditions like [high blood pressure](#) and cholesterol. Ask what your options are.
- **Discuss risks and benefits of treatment options.** Once you know your options, ask about the pros and cons of each one. Find out what side effects might occur, how long the treatment would continue, and how likely it is that the treatment will work for you.
- **Consider how a treatment may affect your life.** When thinking about the pros and cons of a treatment, don't forget to consider its impact on your overall life. For instance, will one of the side effects interfere with a regular activity that means a lot to you? Is one treatment choice expensive and not covered by your insurance? Doctors need to know about these practical matters so they can work with you to develop a treatment plan that meets your needs.

Questions to Ask About Treatment Options

- Are there any risks associated with the treatment?
- How soon should treatment start? How long will it last?
- Are there other treatments available?
- How much will the treatment cost? Will my insurance cover it?

Talking with Medical Specialists

Your doctor may send you to a specialist for further evaluation, or you may request to see a specialist yourself. Your insurance plan may require you to have a referral from your primary doctor. A visit to the specialist may be short. Often, the specialist already has seen your medical records or test results and is familiar with your case. If you are unclear about what the specialist tells you, ask questions.

For example, if the specialist says you have a medical condition that you aren't familiar with, you may want to say something like: *"I don't know much about that condition. Could you explain what it is and how it might affect me?"* or *"I've heard that is a painful problem. What can be done to prevent or [manage the pain](#)?"*

You also may ask for written materials to read, or you can call your primary doctor to clarify anything you haven't understood.

Ask the specialist to send information about any diagnosis or treatment to your primary doctor. This allows your primary doctor to keep track of your medical care. You also should let your primary doctor know at your next visit how well any treatments or [medications](#) the specialist recommended are working.

Questions to Ask Your Specialist

- What is my diagnosis?
- What treatment do you recommend? How soon do I need to begin the new treatment?
- Will you discuss my care with my primary doctor?

If You Need Surgery

In some cases, surgery may be the best treatment for your condition. If so, your doctor will refer you to a surgeon. Knowing more about the operation will help you make an informed decision about how to proceed. It also will help you get ready for the surgery, which makes for a better recovery.

Ask the surgeon to explain what will be done during the operation and what reading material, videos, or websites you can look at before the operation.

Find out if you will have to stay overnight in the hospital or if the surgery can be done on an outpatient basis. Will you need someone to drive you home? Minor surgeries that don't require an overnight stay can sometimes be done at medical centers called ambulatory surgical centers.

Questions to Ask Your Surgeon

- What is the success rate of the operation? How many of these operations have you done successfully?
- What problems occur with this surgery? What kind of pain or discomfort can I expect?
- What kind of anesthesia will I have? Are there any risks associated with its use in older people?
- Will I have to stay in the hospital overnight? How long is recovery expected to take? What does it involve? When can I get back to my normal routine?

Getting a Second Opinion

When patients are diagnosed with a serious illness or surgery is recommended, patients often seek a second opinion. Hearing the views of two different doctors can help you decide what's best for you. In fact, your insurance plan may require it. Doctors are used to this practice, and most will not be insulted by your request for a second opinion. Your doctor may even be able to suggest other doctors who can review your case.

Always remember to check with your insurance provider in advance to find out if a second opinion is covered under your policy, if there are restrictions on which doctors you can see, and if you need a referral form from your primary doctor.

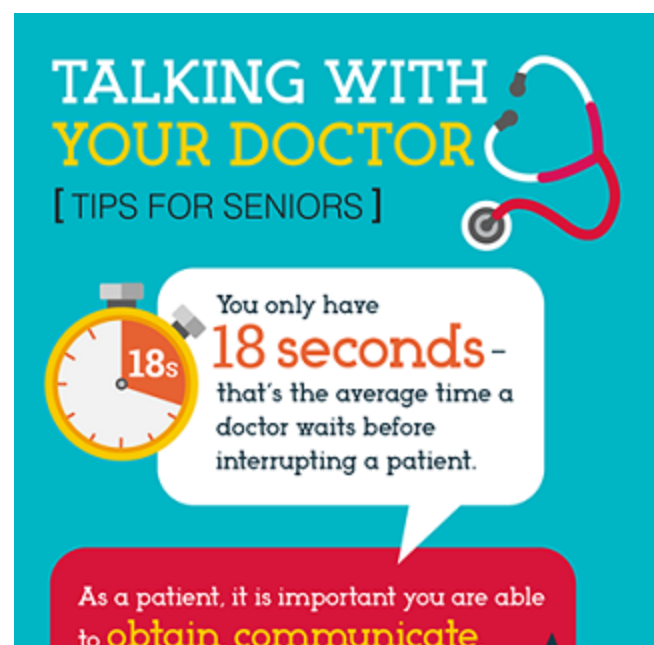
Do you have questions about [palliative care and hospice](#)? [Read about how to care for the seriously ill](#).

Discuss How Prevention Can Improve Your Health

Doctors and other health professionals may suggest you change your diet, activity level, or other aspects of your life to help you deal with medical conditions. Research has shown that these changes, particularly an increase in exercise, have positive effects on overall health.

Until recently, preventing disease in older people received little attention. But, things are changing. We now know that it's never too late to [stop smoking](#), [improve your diet](#), or [start exercising](#). Getting regular checkups and seeing other health professionals, such as dentists and eye specialists, helps promote good health. Even people who have chronic diseases, like [arthritis](#) or [diabetes](#), can prevent further disability and, in some cases, control the progress of the disease.

If a certain disease or health condition runs in your family, ask your doctor if there are steps you can take to help prevent it. If you have a chronic condition, ask how you can manage it and if there are things you can do to keep it from getting worse. If you want to discuss health and disease



prevention with your doctor, [say so when you make your next appointment](#). This lets the doctor plan to spend more time with you.

It is just as important to [talk with your doctor about lifestyle changes](#) as it is to talk about treatment. For example: “*I know that you’ve told me to eat more dairy products, but they really disagree with me. Is there something else I could eat instead?*” or “*Maybe an exercise class would help, but I have no way to get to the senior center. Is there something else you could suggest?*”

As with treatments, consider all the alternatives, look at pros and cons, and remember to take into account your own point of view. Tell your doctor if you feel his or her suggestions won’t work for you and explain why. Keep talking with your doctor to come up with a plan that works.

Many doctors now recommend that older people try to make physical activity a part of everyday life. When you are making your list of things to talk about with your doctor, add exercise. Ask how exercise would benefit you, if there are any activities you should avoid, and whether your doctor can recommend any specific [kinds of exercise](#).

[Start exercising with the links and free videos from NIA, developed specifically for older people.](#)

Questions to Ask Your Doctor About Prevention

- Is there any way to prevent a condition that runs in my family—before it affects me?
- Are there ways to keep my condition from getting worse?
- How will making a change in my habits help me?
- Are there any risks in making this change?
- Are there support groups or community services that might help me?

How to Evaluate Health Information Online

Many people search online to find information about medical problems and health issues. However, not all health information on the web is of equal quality. Read about how to [find websites that are accurate and reliable](#). Don’t forget to talk with your doctor about what you’ve learned online.

You may also be interested in

- Getting [tips for choosing a doctor you can talk to](#)
- Learning [five ways to get the most out of your doctor's visit](#)
- Reading about [talking with your doctor about sensitive issues](#)

For More Information About Making a Treatment Plan with Your Doctor

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

800-232-4636

888-232-6348 (TTY)

cdcinfo@cdc.gov

www.cdc.gov

[Read and share this infographic](#) for tips on how seniors can effectively communicate with their doctors.

Medicare

800-633-4227

877-486-2048 (TTY)

www.cms.gov

www.medicare.gov

MedlinePlus

National Library of Medicine

www.medlineplus.gov

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