

Communicating Effectively with Your Health Care Team

By Harriet Patterson, MPH

You have been sitting in the waiting room for over an hour. You finally get in the consultation room where you wait another 20 minutes. When your doctor enters the room, he spends 12 minutes with you. You shoot off some questions. He responds in short answers, quickly, in language you don't understand. Then, suddenly, your appointment is over.

Have you been in this situation? Many patients and caregivers have described their frustration with similar experiences. Here are some key tips for getting the most out of your next appointment:

Before your visit:

- Establish the goal of this appointment. Is it a general follow-up meeting, a pre-surgical consultation, or a chance to discuss symptoms?
- Many people say they forget their questions at the appointment, so make a list ahead of time. Make a copy for the doctor too, and ask if you can fax it over in advance. NBTF has a standard list of questions if you need help getting started.
- Plan plenty of time to get to your appointment. Let the scheduler know if you have complicated issues to discuss and will need extra time.
- If getting a second opinion, order copies of your MRI films to take with you to the appointment.
- Ask a friend or family member to accompany you to take notes and serve as a second pair of ears.

On the day of your appointment:

- Arrive a few minutes early to allow for parking and catch your breath. Bring something to do while you are waiting, or better yet, someone to talk with.

- Present the list of questions to the nurse you meet with. State the main reason for your appointment first, and then any other issues or questions you have. Restate this information when the doctor comes in.
- Communicate problems or symptoms in concrete terms; explain their impact on your quality of life. Instead of "I've been nauseous" try "I threw up several times during the night and could not eat any food at all for two days." Consider rating symptoms on a scale of 1-10 in terms of their severity. Objective measurements may help give an idea of how distressing your symptoms are.
- You have a right to know what is going on with your care. If you don't understand what your doctor says, ask him or her to restate it.
- If time is running short and you are not finished with your questions, ask if there is a way to follow up later via phone, fax, email or with the nurse.
- Before leaving the appointment, restate the answers you got as you understood them. Ask for written materials to read later at home for any instructions. Get referrals or prescriptions you may need.

After your appointment:

- Follow up as you discussed.
- Add paperwork from this appointment to your patient folder or medical history files.
- Have a clear plan for the next appointment.
- Do something nice for yourself. Some people plan a special lunch or outing after their appointment. Others get a favorite treat (flowers, ice cream). Still others report taking the rest of the day to relax as doctor visits can be stressful.

Save the Date

Upcoming caregiver training dates:

July 27, 2006, Sacramento, CA

September 6, 2006, New Haven, CT

October 20, 2006, New York, NY

For more information, visit www.brainumor.org.

Racing Ahead for NBTF!

Join Team NBTF at the San Francisco Marathon and 5K Run on July 30, 2006. Register at www.causeutorun.com. NBTF is Team #6.