

Taking a Sick Day

A Guide to Visiting the Doctor

By JENNIFER DILLEY, Emory University student

Getting sick is part of life. Everyone experiences days in which he or she simply does not feel well. Yet, if these few days turn into a week or two, you may need to see a doctor before you will be able to get better. Even if you do not feel sick, everyone should have a medical checkup once a year. Visiting the doctor can be an intimidating thought for everyone. Doctors can seem intrusive, uncaring, or just too busy, and this can make going to see one a stressful experience.

Visiting the doctor does not have to be such a difficult experience! Simply knowing what to do and what to expect when you arrive will help make your visit to the doctor's office much less intimidating and much more valuable.

Before the Doctor's Visit

If the situation is not an emergency, you must set up an appointment with your doctor before you can see him. This is very simple to do; all you have to do is call the doctor's office and speak to the receptionist.

If you have a medical emergency, call the telephone number 9-1-1 to receive immediate help. You will speak with an operator who will dispatch an ambulance to come and take you to the emergency room at the nearest hospital. This number is reserved for emergencies only, so unless the situation is serious, wait for your appointment.

Before the day of your doctor's visit, write down a list of questions that you think of to ask the doctor. Do not wait until you arrive at the doctor's office to think of what you want to ask him. Many people get to the doctor's office and promptly forget what they wanted to ask the doctor. To avoid wasting your appointment, make your list of questions several days before your visit and add on to it as you think of new questions. Do not be afraid to ask your doctor anything. He or she is there for the sole purpose of helping you to understand your health and take care of your body. Do not be embarrassed. Whatever your problem is, the doctor has seen it before.

Also, think about the best way to explain your symptoms to your doctor. This will help him to make a more accurate diagnosis and will open the communication lines between you and your doctor. For example, if you have stomach pain, be able to tell your doctor if it is a sharp, shooting pain or a dull, persistent ache. You might write these down as well.

What to Bring

Bring your insurance card and any medical records you may have with you to the doctor's office. You will need these to fill out some preliminary forms before you see the doctor.

Bring a friend or close family member with you to the doctor's office. Your companion will be there for moral support and will help you relax if you are nervous about anything. They will also be able to help you if you are too ill to get around without assistance.

Bring a notebook with you into the doctor's office and write down instructions and information your doctor gives you before you leave the office. This way, you will not return home and forget what the doctor said because it will already be written down. Write down your diagnosis and make sure to get the correct spelling. Also write down any medicines your doctor prescribes for you. You can look over the notes you take later when you have time to absorb the information.

The Actual Visit

When the day of your appointment arrives, plan to arrive 15 to 20 minutes early for your appointment. Arriving early ensures that you will not miss your appointment time, and it shows your doctor that you are courteous of his busy schedule. It also indicates that you are serious about receiving your full scheduled time with your doctor. You may be charged a fee for missing your appointment.

When your doctor gives you instructions or demonstrates something to you, repeat these back to him or practice the demonstration while he is in the room to ensure that you understand exactly what to do.

If your doctor explains something to you and you do not understand, do not be afraid to ask him to explain it again! Doctors often use long medical terms that confuse many people, and they forget that most of their patients do not understand their vast medical vocabulary.

If you still do not understand after the doctor has explained the concept again, try asking a nurse. She will tell you the same information, but having another viewpoint of the explanation may make it easier for you to understand. Make sure that you are talking to a nurse and not a desk receptionist. Keep asking until you understand what the doctor is trying to tell you! It is very important that you know what is going on with your body.

When your doctor first enters the examination room, he will ask you how you are feeling. This is your chance to explain to him exactly what hurts or what symptoms you are having. Do not answer by simply saying that you are fine. Communicate with your doctor!

IMPORTANT: Do not withhold information about your medical history or current health from your doctor. This is crucial information because it lets the doctor know what drugs he may prescribe you or what preexisting conditions you already have that may have caused your current condition. He is there to help you, and he cannot do so if he does not understand your body's health history. Make sure to mention to your doctor all medicines or herbs you are taking.

Extra Hints

If your insurance does not cover the particular doctor you visited, do not panic. Often, doctors' offices will give discounts to patients who are not covered by their insurance. Ask at the front desk about the insurance policy, and if there is any way to receive a discount for patients who will not receive help from their insurance company.

IMPORTANT: Doctors' offices are legally required to provide an interpreter for you if you feel that you need one. However, they do not broadcast this policy, and you will have to ask for an interpreter if you want one. If you run into any problems, contact an immigrant advocacy group, such as Culture Connect. Their web site is found at <http://www.cultureconnectglobal.com/index.html>. Organizations such as this offer language services and legal advocacy, which will be helpful if you run into problems.

After the Visit

If you return home and think of another question, call your doctor's office back! You will not have to go to another appointment, as most questions can easily be answered over the phone. If you feel you need to speak directly to your doctor, be patient but firm in your request. Your doctor may be busy at the moment, but he will speak to you when he has a free moment.

Visiting the doctor is a crucial part of everyone's good health. Do not be afraid to ask questions! With these tips in mind, your doctor's visit should go smoothly.