

How can I prepare for my visit with a specialist?

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There are many things the patient can do before, during, and after a doctor's visit to maximize their experience from the encounter. Hopefully, this primer for doctor visit can help you achieve maximum utility from your visit with a specialist. Below you will find a number of things that you can do to maximize your experience:

1. **Logistics.** Make sure that you know the exact time and date of your visit. Many doctors have multiple office locations, and it is in your best interest to make sure that you understand which office location you have the appointment at.
2. **Arrival.** It is best if you come to the appointment 15-20 minutes ahead of your scheduled time. This will let you enough time to fill out any necessary forms and to process your insurance information. Once the paperwork is done ahead of time, you increase your likelihood of being seen at the exact time of the appointment.
3. **Insurance information.** Remember to bring your insurance card as well as any other information relating to your visit. Additionally, make sure that you have the information pertaining to the name and the address of your referring doctor with you, as your specialist's office will need this to process the visit.
4. **Referral.** If you needed to obtain a referral from your primary doctor, or even if your primary doctor wrote a short prescription with the name and number of the specialist, make sure to bring it with you during your visit with the doctor. This referral not only includes insurance information, but it also usually includes instructions from your primary doctor to the specialist about what problems are to be looked at.
5. **Chief complaint.** The chief complaint is the medical terminology for the main reason for the visit. This often should be described in a few words, and definitely not more than one sentence. It gives your doctor an idea about the main cause of your discomfort, and will further guide the remainder of the discussion that you will have with your doctor. Make sure that you concur with your primary doctor that this is the reason that you were referred to see the specialist. If you are seeing the specialist for more than one main concern, make sure you list them consecutively in order of importance, and do not bunch them or overlap your descriptions.

6. History of present illness. In the next few sentences describe in more detail the reason for your visit. Give your doctor explanation of the ways that your disease or discomfort has been bothersome to you. It is best to describe things in a chronological sequence, starting with the first onset of your symptoms, following to your current situation.

7. Stay focused. Patients sometimes feel overwhelmed in trying to maximize their time in describing the necessary information for the doctor to better understand their problem. It is always better to you keep yourself calm and organized while you are describing your symptoms. Also, if you have been referred to see the doctor for multiple distinct problems, try not to jump around from one problem to the next and back and forth as this will confuse both yourself and your doctor.

8. Do not self-diagnose. In this day and age of easy access to medical information, specially with the internet, many patients have been able to read up on their conditions before they come for a visit. Based on the information they gathered, many patients self-diagnose before their doctor's visit and they fall into routine of describing the diagnosis they learned about rather than the actual symptoms that they are experiencing. This common mistake can once again complicate your diagnosis. Your best bet is to describe your symptoms without any bias and allow your doctor to come to a correct medical conclusion

.9. Other doctors' visits. Many patients seeing a specialist have already seen their primary doctor or even an emergency room doctor or another specialist before they are coming for their current visit. Often times, other tests or interventions have been recommended, and the patient is there to get a followup. Before you start describing all your other doctors' visits, it is best to actually describe your symptoms first, and only then to tell your doctor what previous doctors have accomplished for you.

10. Past medical history. Be knowledgeable about your other medical problems, and relay them reliably to your doctor. Although you might not think that any of your other medical conditions might have any relation to your current problem you are discussing, your doctor may need this information in making an overall diagnosis, as well as making sure that any treatment he/she recommends does not interfere with your other medical conditions. It is best to provide your doctor with as much information on the initial intake sheets, and let your doctor decide how much of that information is relevant for the current visit.

11. Past Surgical History. Similar to the medical history, your surgical history can provide a lot of information about your body's anatomy to your doctor.

12. Medications. Many patients take several medications on a regular basis, but cannot accurately recall the names or the dosage due to the complexity of the names of these medicines and the routine of taking them. Some patients prefer to bring all their medicines with them to the doctor visit and let the doctor take a complete inventory of all that information. Alternatively, you can make an accurate list of the name of the medications, then number of milligrams, and the number of times a day that you have to take the medicine and give this to your doctor to copy and include in your chart. It is not acceptable for anyone to either not know by heart, or bring with them complete information about the medicines that they are taking.

13. Allergies. It is in your best interest to be knowledgeable about any allergies or interactions you have had to other medications that were given to you previously. This way your doctor can better give you the treatments that they deem appropriate for you without potentially running into another side effect.

14. Physical examination. After you and your doctor had a thorough discussion of your symptoms, it is time to be examined. Make sure that you are wearing appropriate clothing for the kind of visit that you are expecting. For example, if you are seeing the doctor to have the ears examined, please do not wear a hat or any other headgear that blocks the ears. If you are seeing the doctor to have your thyroid checked, refrain from wearing a turtleneck or any other tight collared shirts.

15. Labs and other test results. Patients who are seeing specialists might have had previous blood tests or x-rays or other tests that they would like to discuss with the doctor. Many times, the patients are reassured by the referring doctors that these results would be forwarded to the specialists before the time of the patient's visit. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. If your primary doctor is not sure of the date of your specialist appointment, they might not have had a chance to forward the information in a timely manner. Conversely, if your specialist received the test results before your very first visit, those results might not always end up in an appropriate location where they could be found easily during your appointment. I recommend that at any time that you are coming to discuss specific results, bring a copy of the results with you to show the specialist. This will significantly reduce any time looking around for test results that often needs to get done when the patient arrives for their consultation.

16. Family and Friends. Use your judgment to decide who, if anybody, should come with you to the office visit. Having family and friends come with you during an important visit can sometimes ease your anxiety, and can also be a source of comfort for you. Additionally, any significant others can give you extra feedback that you might be too nervous to ask for. Conversely, extra people present during the visit can sometimes reduce the intimacy that the patient might need to honestly relay information to the doctor. A crowded visit can also be very distracting to both yourself and your doctor. This is especially true when adult patients need to be seen, and their children who are coming along are distracting. Again, use your judgment and make the best decision about people accompanying you to the doctor's visit.

17. Questions. Make sure that once the doctor has finished his examination of you, and is giving you an explanation of your condition and the treatments recommended, that you fully understand what is being explained to you. If you believe that the language is too complicated, or if the doctor is going too fast, ask the appropriate questions so that you have a full comprehension of the situation. Make sure you also understand what other test or other X-rays are being recommended for you, and when are you supposed to come for a follow up.

18. Be courteous in time. Your doctor probably has more patients scheduled before and after you. While you should have a thorough discussion and get all your concerns addressed during your visit, be mindful that other patients might be waiting to see the doctor after you. Be courteous and keep the discussion to the point.