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# Getting the Most From a Doctor's Visit

Your child's doctor is a key resource when you have questions and concerns about your child's health. But doctors are pressured to see more patients each day and to spend less time with them, so it's important to make the most of your time together.

Here are tips on the best ways to handle your concerns and questions, and get the most information from your child's visit.

## What Should I Do Before a Doctor's Visit?

Be an active partner in your child's health to help them get the best care possible. Look for reliable health information online and ask the doctor's office to recommend sites where you can learn more about your child's health and development. Many practices have their own websites that may offer helpful information for patients and parents.

Keep in mind, though, that some sites include incomplete or inaccurate medical and health information. The doctor can give you the most accurate answers that are specific to your child.

Make a note of your questions and concerns before the doctor's visit to help you remember everything you want to bring up. Write down any symptoms your child has so that you can mention them even if the doctor doesn't ask. Be prepared to tell the doctor what you've tried to make the symptoms better and what worked and what didn't. Providing as much information as possible helps the doctor assess your child's health.

If possible, it's best if a parent goes to all doctor visits. This is especially true for complex issues like behavior problems, or well-child checkups, when detailed developmental topics may be discussed. Leave other kids with another caregiver, if you can.

## What Should I Do During a Doctor's Visit?

Respect the doctor's time by arriving on time or a few minutes early. If you can't help being late, let the office know, and give at least 24 hours' notice to cancel or reschedule. Many office schedules are packed weeks in advance, so schedule well-child or non-sick visits early.

Silence your phone and focus your full attention on answering the doctor's questions. Also try to stick to the reason for the visit — for example, don't use a sick visit to discuss behavior problems that may need an in-depth evaluation. Instead, ask for a separate visit. Let the office staff know the nature of your child's problem so they can schedule a longer visit time.

## What Will The Doctor Do?

What can you expect from your doctor during a visit? Depending on what you are bringing your child in for, the doctor will:

- help you monitor your child's health
- explain your child's growth and development and what you can expect

- diagnose and treat any minor or moderately serious illnesses
- explain any illnesses and treatment
- give you information about how to prevent injuries and keep your child safe
- provide referrals and work with specialists if illnesses need special care

Your pediatrician, family doctor, or nurse practitioner also can help you with other children's health issues, including:

- exercise, nutrition, and weight issues
- behavioral and emotional issues
- coping with family issues, such as death, separation, and divorce
- understanding and getting help for learning disabilities

Good communication is a two-way street. Be open and honest with the information you share and have reasonable expectations. Let the doctor know that you trust them to care for your child. It's good to ask questions, but know that decisions, diagnoses, and prescriptions are based on what's best for your child's health. For example, parents might expect a drug or medicine to treat a cold, when a wait-and-see approach is often better.

## What Should I Do After a Doctor's Visit?

Before you leave the doctor's office, make sure you understand what follow-up visits, lab tests, or blood work your child needs. Take notes about any instructions to help you remember them. If you don't understand how to give a medicine or treatment, ask the nurse or doctor before you leave the office. Check in with the office if the medicine prescribed isn't working or your child's symptoms get worse or they develop new symptoms.

Calling the office with questions about symptoms can save you and the doctor time and money, but do so only as needed. Nurses or nurse practitioners answer phone questions for pediatric practices and can handle non-urgent questions. Nighttime calls should only be for more urgent issues — remember, the doctor is at home then.

If possible, communicate electronically. Many practices use electronic health records (EHR) on a patient portal. This can be a convenient way to get answers to non-urgent questions. You can send your questions any time of day or night and get answers from the doctor or office staff when they can address them. But don't use email or the portal's messaging if you think your child has an urgent problem — talk directly to the health care provider by phone if there's time, or take your child to the emergency room or call 911.

Don't be afraid to give the doctor feedback about your office visit, such as whether you felt rushed or needed more information about a prescription or procedure. Your doctor wants to work with you to give the best care possible for your child.

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