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Getting the most out of your doc!

The topic of family physician accessibility in BC has dominated the news the past few months. For many, having a family physician remains elusive. Even if you have one, getting an appointment may be a problem.

Whether attending a walk-in clinic, seeing your family doc, or meeting an orthopaedic surgeon for the first time, maximize the time you have in that examination room or on that video call to explain your health concerns and define an action plan. Be proactive in managing your – or your family member's – health!

How to prepare for the appointment

The average family physician appointment is a maximum of 10 minutes, depending on the day. Short, considering you need to explain the reason for your visit, have an examination, and the treatment plan needs to be defined. Being prepared and succinct will go a long way to maximizing that time.

Physicians want to discuss one health concern per visit; do not 'save up' concerns, and instead **prioritize** the main reason for your visit. If you have a few concerns, make an appointment for a full physical. Find out more from the [Ontario Medical Association](#).

While [this article](#) was written for those with breast cancer, the excellent tips apply to preparing for any medical appointment, such as **noting what makes your symptoms better or worse**.

Prepare a checklist of questions to mark off as you discuss them one by one with the physician, and be sure to bring:

- Paper and a pen
- Health Number
- An interpreter if required
- A friend or family member, where recommended, who can take notes while you listen

Find out more from the [BC Women's Hospital and Health Centre](#) about the importance of advocacy for yourself and others.

Bringing a friend, family member or someone who can serve as a health advocate on your behalf may be very helpful; or you may be this person, attending the appointment with your family member or friend. Having another person at the medical appointment can be very helpful when the patient may not be able to fully able to communicate their health needs or understand the physician recommendations, either due to language comprehension, their capacity at the time of the appointment, or even the seriousness and anxiety surrounding the visit (e.g. mental illness or dementia). In addition, when an individual receives concerning health news for the first time, for example in the case of cancer or multiple sclerosis, they often do not hear much of what the physician says after the diagnosis is shared.

When preparing for a specialist appointment, the linked tips apply, plus

- Prepare a summary of your health history for reference. The specialist does not know you and this information may be important.
- Call ahead to ensure any test results have arrived before your appointment .

When at your appointment

Arrive early – at least 10 – 15 minutes before your appointment time: don't be late.

Ask questions! Don't be shy or embarrassed. The physician is working for you, and needs to hear from you. They want to understand what is going on, and if you need clarification, so they can give you the best possible care. Be honest and share relevant details about your medical history, concerns, and substance use without feeling embarrassment or a fear of being judged. If you're planning to discuss a personal topic, one way to avoid nerves is to practice what you plan to say in advance. Physicians have heard it all and are legally bound to keep the conversation and information confidential.

Watch this [Global News story](#) that outlines how to make the most of your doctor's appointment, and to ensure that you understand the next steps:

Take notes or ask for handouts or links to resources online if you need more information.

Following the appointment, you should be able to answer the following questions:

What is the main health problem: What does the doctor believe is the main health concern. They may not know yet, and further assessment is needed; if this is so, you should understand that too.

What do I need to do: You should understand exactly what actions you need to take to address your health concern: taking a medication, going to get a test done, or lifestyle adjustments like healthier eating.

Why is it important for me to do this: It is important to understand why the particular intervention is needed and exactly how it will help. For example, a doctor might prescribe a blood pressure medication, even though you're not showing symptoms. If you don't understand that it's to prevent a possible heart attack five years from now, you might be less inclined to take it.

Follow up from the appointment

Always follow through on the physician instructions and follow treatment recommendations. Remember, the pharmacist is an excellent source of answers to any medication questions.

If you are unsure or confused, follow up immediately with your physician.

If you're given a referral, you should know how long you should wait to hear about an appointment. Always follow up when your physician has referred you for further medical appointments with another health provider or for specific tests (e.g. CT scans, specialists, ECG). Directly contact both your physician's office and the other health provider to ensure they have the referral, and to learn when they can get you in. If possible, tell them you are available sooner should a cancellation come up.

The same goes for test results – you should know how long it will take, and if you don't hear anything, follow up directly with your physician's office. No news is not always good news. Some physician's offices

will only contact you if there is a problem, however, ***carry through and follow up!*** Results can get lost, and you can be proactive in looking after your health!

Remember: you own your own health. Your physicians are there as resources in your recovery and well-being journey, but you drive the bus. Maximize the time you spend with them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rochelle Morandini

Member Health & Well-Being, Director

If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.