

Your GP Consultation

ARTHRITIS ACTION FACTSHEETS



Most of us feel a bit uneasy about speaking to healthcare professionals, especially if we don't understand our symptoms or are nervous about test results. However, there are some simple things you can do to get the most from your GP surgery and consultation.

Getting to see your GP

Since lockdown, most GP surgeries have struggled with additional workload and levels of staffing, so now offer many consultations by telephone or virtually. Whilst many minor issues can be managed without a face-to-face appointment, other patients need to be seen in person, though it can sometimes be challenging to navigate reception staff and online forms to get the attention you need.

Most GP surgeries now operate an online triage service. In this service, you are asked to complete a form online and GPs then decide who they need to see and how urgently. It is very important that you fill out this form with as much information as possible, otherwise an important issue may be missed. If you struggle with online forms, try to find someone who can help you, and remember to mention your most urgent problem first.

Remember that GPs are there because they want to help you and give you good care. If you feel that you haven't received the support that you need, the Patient's Association recommend that you speak to the Practice Manager who should be able to help.

Make a list of the most important things that you want to get out of the consultation

Once you get to see your GP, whether in person or online, remember that GPs only have about 10 minutes to see you. It is important that you are clear about what you need from your consultation. This could be your main concern about what is wrong, answers about what tests are required, or what you can do to help yourself while you wait to be seen again. If you have a long list of problems, it is best to concentrate on your main worry first and then make another appointment to talk about the other issues.

Hospital consultations or appointments with physical therapists will usually be longer, but it is still important that you think about what you wish to get out of your appointment to make the most of the limited time available. If you feel that you haven't got what you hoped by the end of the consultation, don't be afraid to ask, or you can ask for a second opinion.

Take a list of your medicines (including things you buy over the counter)

GPs will already have a record of what tablets you are taking, but hospitals and physical therapists may not have this information. Some medicines that you can buy over the counter (including herbal remedies) can interact with other medicines, so don't forget to mention these too.

Take someone with you to make notes or help to ask difficult questions

Studies have shown that we can only remember a small part of the information that we are told during a consultation, so it can be helpful to bring a family member or friend who can help us remember what has been said, or ask questions on our behalf. It can also help if you make notes during the consultation, so that you can look back on what was said later. Even if your consultation is over the phone or on a video call, it can be helpful to have someone beside you to help.

Ask for a copy of any letters that are being written to your GP or other healthcare professional

After a hospital appointment, your healthcare professional will always write to your GP to explain the plan for your care. You may have a copy of this letter which can help remind you what was said, so don't be afraid to ask.

If you don't understand or can't hear what is being said – ask again!

Healthcare professionals are trained to communicate. If you can't hear or don't understand what is being said, that is their fault, not yours! Don't be afraid to ask them to speak louder or ask them to repeat the explanation. Requesting your healthcare professional to draw a diagram or use non-medical words may also help you understand better.

There's no need to be nervous

Doctors and healthcare professionals are only human. They have chosen their job because they want to help, so there's no need to feel nervous about explaining your problems and asking for help.

Ask what you can do to help yourself

Sometimes some of the simplest advice is the best. For example, to rest, do gentle exercise, get some sleep, or to take some painkillers. It can be reassuring to know that you are already doing all you can to help yourself and will not cause yourself any harm.

Social prescribing

Social prescribing, also known as community referral, is a relatively new process where healthcare professionals such as GPs, practice nurses, physiotherapists and others, can refer you to local services aimed at improving your health and welfare which help you to help yourself. This could include referral to a local gym, swimming pool, exercise class, or giving useful advice on healthy eating or weight management. It can also include other services run by charities or local groups to help your emotional health, such as volunteering, arts or social activities like gardening. Social prescribing can have significant health benefits and has been shown to improve emotional wellbeing, quality of life, depression and anxiety. Ask about services that are available in your area.

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