

## Managing Healthcare Appointments<sup>123</sup>

Attending appointments with healthcare professionals can cause a lot of stress and anxiety and people often leave feeling they have not managed to discuss the issues concerning them most. Let's look at how you can make the most of these appointments.

### Prepare

Writing down things that you feel are important to discuss is a great idea. During your appointment it is easy to forget things or to get sidetracked by just one issue. Put the things that are most important to you at the top as it isn't always possible to get through everything in one appointment.

Before visiting a clinic for the first time, you may wish to call ahead for information about accessibility (for example, locations of lifts, wheelchair ramps or disabled toilets).

### List current medicines

It's always a good idea to take a list of your current medicines. Don't rely on health professionals having that information as they may not always have access to it. This list can save lots of time, which you can use to ask questions and share information.

Remember, your last repeat prescription may not be up to date so check before you go. Tell the healthcare professional at your review if there are medicines on your repeat medication list that you are not taking as prescribed or if you are having problems with any of the medicines.

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<sup>1</sup> Patients with chronic health problems benefit when involved with their own care: Angela Coulter and Jo Ellins, "Effectiveness of Strategies for Informing, Educating, and Involving Patients," *BMJ : British Medical Journal* 335, no. 7609 (July 7, 2007): 24–27, doi:10.1136/bmj.39246.581169.80.

<sup>2</sup> 'There is a proven link between the engagement of patients in their health and outcomes.' *The quality of patient engagement and involvement in primary care*. The King's Fund 2010. [http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field\\_document/patient-engagement-involvement-gp-inquiry-research-paper-mar11.pdf](http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field_document/patient-engagement-involvement-gp-inquiry-research-paper-mar11.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> 'Many patients wish to be active participants in their own healthcare.' *Patient experience in adult NHS services: improving the experience of care for people using adult NHS services*. NICE 2012. <http://publications.nice.org.uk/patient-experience-in-adult-nhs-services-improving-the-experience-of-care-for-people-using-adult-cg138/guidance#enabling-patients-to-actively-participate-in-their-care>

## Your appointment

The purpose of the appointment is for you to discuss areas of progress and/or concern and for the healthcare professional to get a clear understanding of where things are with you.

If you are uncomfortable with other people being present, such as medical students, it is perfectly acceptable to ask them to go. They will not mind at all – they may be glad to get a coffee!

When talking to your healthcare professional, stick to what you have decided you want to discuss and be ready to repeat your message until it gets through. This is one reason why it's so important to prepare beforehand. Don't be put off, but try to remain calm and polite.

## Do you need more time?

Arranging double appointments is sometimes possible, so ask when you make your appointment if you feel it is necessary. The extra time can stop you feeling overwhelmed by all the things you need to discuss in the short space of a single appointment.

## Take a friend

Having someone else there with you can often help, as they can remind you of what you want to discuss and they often remember things afterwards which you have not taken in. Make sure to choose someone you trust and who isn't going to take over YOUR appointment.

## Write it down

If you don't have someone with you who can jot things down, ask the health professional to make a note of key things, for example, changes to medication, different treatments, names of diagnoses, or of other health professionals. Many clinics now provide written information on your plan of treatment to take home with you. You may also ask for a copy of any letter a healthcare professional sends to colleagues about your treatment.

Make your own notes as well, just to remind yourself of what has been said. Checking your notes is a good way of remembering your previous appointment before a new one, especially when it may have been months since your last consultation and lots may have changed. This helps you to update your health professional quickly, and gives you more time to discuss the important points.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Taking notes and having access to records from consultations improves patients' recall of advice and use of medications: Angela Coulter and Jo Ellins, "Effectiveness of Strategies for Informing, Educating, and Involving Patients," *BMJ : British Medical Journal* 335, no. 7609 (July 7, 2007): 24–27, doi:10.1136/bmj.39246.581169.80.

## Fill it in

If you attend a pain clinic you may be asked to complete a questionnaire prior to your appointment. Although these take time and it can be difficult to see their relevance, they do give health professionals important information allowing them to assess your needs quickly and direct your consultation appropriately. Many healthcare sites also gather information for research purposes. Where this is the case this will be discussed with you and your permission requested.

## Bear in mind

Things do not always run smoothly at clinics. Notes may not be available or clinics may run late. This is frustrating for both you and the staff, but it is not always a result of something within their control.

Feedback – positive or negative – can help the NHS to improve services. If you feel that your treatment has not been satisfactory, you could first raise the issue with your healthcare provider. If you are still dissatisfied, the NHS has a formal complaints procedure about which you can seek support or advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau or the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS).

Healthcare professionals have different specialisms, so if you feel they ignored or discounted something that was important to you, it may just mean it is not their area of expertise and they don't feel able to advise you on that issue. Also, medicine has its limitations. The healthcare professional may be an expert but there may not be a straightforward solution.

It is important that you are involved in decisions about your care, so that you and your healthcare professional can find the best way forward. Pain Concern has produced a series of self-management videos to help with this. You can watch them on [painconcern.org.uk](http://painconcern.org.uk).

## Jacquelyn Watson is Nurse Specialist at the Glasgow Pain Management Programme

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