



Things to Think About!



By Brandan Atkin

Visit the links below for more information on becoming medically wise and help with questions to ask your physician.

<http://www.aipm.net/workshop/The4R's.htm>

<http://www.nei.nih.gov/health/talkto doc.asp>

SNRP will shortly have a link under the forms section for a Q&A form to use at your leisure.

If there is anything that is not discussed in our newsletters and you would like to see it discussed, or you would like to be added to our newsletter mailing list, please contact us at snrproject@hotmail.com

The Savvy Medical Consumer

By Linda Jorgensen

Have you ever found yourself sitting in a doctor's exam room wondering what, exactly, the doctor just said to you? Did you think he, or she, was speaking in a foreign language or some secret code? If so, you are not alone. According to a 2004 report by the Institute of Medicine, nearly 90 million American adults have difficulty understanding and using health information given to them by their physicians. Part of the problem is the complicated nature of today's medicine. Technical advances in the last 50 years have created complex procedures, innumerable new medications and a health care delivery system that is confusing at best. All of this makes understanding the system and interacting with doctors more difficult for the average person.

Many patients (and parents) feel overwhelmed when dealing directly with doctors, pharmacies, insurance companies and the multitude of complicated government agencies. Confusion and frustration are common complaints. And as daunting as it may seem, the only solution is for patients, and parents, to become more savvy medical consumers.

Preparing for a Doctor's Visit

For many individuals the key to good patient-doctor communication is preparing for doctor's visits in advance. Be prepared to briefly explain your medical history and the reason for the office visit. Take a list of concerns and questions, listed in order of importance, to assist you in communicating your needs with the doctor. Once you are in the exam room be sure to tell the doctor what you hope and expect from the visit and any treatment he or she may recommend.

Communication is crucial. Does your doctor use terms or phrases you don't understand? If so, ask for an

explanation. Many mistakes in medical care begin right here. If you are unclear about ANYTHING you and the doctor are discussing, ask for a clarification. It is important to understand the doctor's instructions completely. If you don't understand why your doctor wishes you to have a specific medical test, ask him, or her, directly. Be specific. Ask what the test is for, why does he, or she, want you to have it, are there other tests that can provide similar results, etc.

Take along a note pad and pencil and take notes as you are talking, if possible. Write down specific information regarding any diagnosis, recommended treatments, recommended medications, diet changes and any other instructions the doctor may have for you. If you can't take notes ask for written information, or handouts, about the medical situation you are discussing. Many offices have patient education handouts for this specific purpose. For detailed medication questions most pharmacies include a "Patient Education" sheet with every prescription they fill. You can also ask your pharmacist for further help with medication information.

During your visit

Many patients find it easier to sit and simply listen to their physician without taking an active part in the discussion. Again, communication is crucial. You need to be an active participant in your, or your child's, health care decisions and treatment plans. Head nodding is not a form of conversation. You'll have to speak up.

- If the doctor tells you to do something you know you can't do, such as give a medication in the middle of the night, ask what other times the medication can be given or ask if there is another medication that would be as effective given at other times of the day. Explain why.

- Ask about options for tests, medications or recommended surgical procedures.
- Ask **why** a specific test or procedure is recommended and what the risks are. Are there alternatives? What are they?
- Consider all your options, pros and cons, including "watchful waiting". Is it possible to take a few days to see if a situation will resolve itself? For example, will a fever go away after a few days or do I need to worry about it now?
- Lastly, trust your intuition. Use common sense. If you have doubts, or feel uncomfortable with what has been recommended, get a second opinion.

Still have questions?

There are many opportunities to find good health information. You may call your hospital's library or health resource center for help in researching questions your doctor may not have answered completely. Don't be afraid to call your doctor's office and ask for the office nurse or the doctor directly. Or, you may wish to do further research using the Internet. We highly recommend the Hardin Library for the Health Sciences at the University of Iowa. You can find further contact information at <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/hardin/md> Many local state universities have medical libraries available for public use as well.

Improving your health literacy will take time and effort but this is time and effort well spent. Better communication between patient and doctor will result in better overall health care, avoid costly mistakes and may reduce future health problems. Ask questions now so you aren't paying for your lack of understanding later.