

# SELF

## The Best Way To Talk To Your Doctor, According To Doctors

Pro tips for making every visit more worthwhile and less frustrating.



There you are, in that crinkly paper gown that never overlaps quite right in the back, sitting on an examining table that feels like fine-grain sandpaper. In the midst of the almost oppressive quiet, you

may be thinking about why you're there and what comes next, spinning out dramatic worst-case scenarios like a reality-show diva. The last thing on your mind is what kind of small talk you can make when your doc shows up.

But, some [doctors](#) note, that's exactly what you should be pondering.

"Communication is one of the most important aspects of medical care," says Larry Altshuler, an internist and author of patient guide, *Doctor Say What?* He notes that there's a term called "white coat silence" that means a patient doesn't talk much, and doesn't ask questions, for reasons like [embarrassment](#) or intimidation.

But doctors think that silence equals satisfaction with care or understanding about a diagnosis or treatment plan, when that may not be the case. Altshuler says, "Please, talk to us. Most doctors want you to take an active role in your care."

What can you do to make your appointment a sweet little communication fest? Plenty. Here are some tips on making that paper-gown time worth the visit:

## **Talk to your doctor like a human. Because she is one.**

Because you often have limited time with a doctor, it's unlikely that you're going to [divulge old secrets and become besties](#). But there's no reason you can't reach a certain level of friendly banter, believes Daniel Meltzer, a physician who also focuses on helping doctors communicate more effectively with their patients.

"This sounds odd, but patients seem to forget that doctors are people," he says. "We want to connect with you on a personal level. Unless the physician is in an emergency situation, he or she doesn't want to do a 'diagnose and adios' appointment."

He adds that seeing a new doc can be like going on a blind date, with the same kind of brief, upfront chit-chat. “Take 15 seconds to just say hello, and see each other as human beings,” he advises. That makes it easier on both sides, and establishes some solid communication for subsequent visits.

## **Tell the truth. All of it.**

So, maybe you have some lifestyle habits that could be an eensy bit better. You’ve gotten a little [boozy](#), [smoky](#), [sexy](#), or [cupcakey](#) lately. Or you sorta forgot to take your medication—for the last three months.

In those cases, you might be tempted to leave out the details. But what you want to talk about the least is exactly what the doctor needs to know the most.

“Many people lie because they don’t want to upset their doctor for some reason,” says Erika Schwartz, a physician and author of patient advocacy guide, *Don’t Let Your Doctor Kill You*. “They worry about being judged, or making a doctor angry.”

She adds, “The result is that you don’t get the care you really need. You need to take ownership of your health. And that starts with having the confidence to be honest.”

## **Make a cheat sheet.**

No matter how relaxed and chatty you might be, it’s possible you could forget a few [questions](#) in the midst of an exam. Come prepared by writing down your concerns in advance and letting your doctor know upfront what you want to [talk about](#), says Altshuler.

If your list is lengthy, you can check with your doctor's office about requesting a longer appointment. Not all physicians have this flexibility, but the ones who do appreciate the ability to really dig into what your issues might be, instead of trying to race through your list.

## **Bring a medical wingman.**

Another tactic for better communication is to bring someone to take notes. This seems a little extreme for a routine check-up, but if you have genuine concerns that require complex treatment, having a pal or family member along is invaluable.

"You may get into a conversation at an appointment, and you don't want to stop talking just to jot down what the doctor is saying," notes Abigail Schildcrout, M.D., a specialist in internal medicine who runs a consulting firm, Practical Medical Insights, for patients trying to get more effective medical care.

Even during short visits, patients tend to retain only part of the information about [diagnosis, treatment, follow-up advice](#) and other crucial aspects of their appointments. Having notes as a reference keeps you on track, and doctors have mad love for that kind of organization.

"When someone reads those notes back at the end of the appointment, and everything is included, that's just a great moment," says Meltzer. "That leads to you and the doctor working together. Healthcare should be a team sport."

## **Don't be afraid to push back.**

If you're feeling dubious about a diagnosis or a treatment option, say something. That sounds easy, but Schwartz recognizes that it often feels like a big hurdle to overcome for many patients.

“If you feel that you can’t say what you think, especially if you disagree, then you’re putting your health at risk,” she says. “Recognize that you know your body better than the doctor does. So, start that conversation.”

The emphasis here is on communication instead of debate. Schwartz suggests that patients ask questions—and to keep on asking them until doc and patient are aligned. That Q&A approach also tends to feel less adversarial, but if you’re getting a huffy vibe, it may be time to consider another opinion. Schwartz says, “Don’t accept anything less than respect and kindness. If you can’t get that from your medical professional, [find one who can give that to you.](#)”

Doctors don’t like “white coat silence” any more than patients do. Both sides want more effective care, better treatment, and kickass recovery. But like any relationship, it takes some communication and effort on both sides to make that happen. So do your part to be an empowered patient and you’ll gain respect—even in a crumpled paper gown.