

Better Healthcare Communication



If a woman feels anxious or overwhelmed at her healthcare appointment, she may not describe her symptoms accurately or ask questions. This can result in delays in diagnosing problems like heart disease.

Symptoms associated with a heart attack and heart disease are varied and women, in particular, may not experience the typical symptoms. That's why the words chosen to describe symptoms take on extra importance. They provide clues to assist the doctor or practitioner in making the correct diagnosis from the start.

Being organized before medical visits, learning how the healthcare system works and how to activate it, effectively communicating symptoms and asking questions when there is something you don't understand can make a life-saving difference in your health care.

Prepare for your visits. Write down a list of all your concerns and give it to your doctor at the beginning of each appointment. List your most important concerns first.

Be Clear, Objective and Persistent when communicating symptoms.

Clearly state the purpose of your visit and be specific.

SAY: "I'm here to see you today because, for the past two weeks, I've been having a burning sensation in the center of my chest. I've also been having palpitations which make me feel anxious. I don't feel right... could it be my heart?"

DON'T SAY: "I think I've been having panic attacks. I've been under a lot of stress lately."

Objectively report symptoms.

SAY: "I've been getting winded going up the steps. I've never had a problem climbing stairs before."

DON'T SAY: "I don't have any energy. I must be depressed."

Persist in finding a practitioner who will listen to you. Make sure she/he understands you.

SAY: "I'm not comfortable simply taking a medication to calm my nerves. Please refer me to a cardiologist who understands the needs of women. I must have further testing to ease my mind."

DON'T STOP: Continue to seek care if you have a problem that needs a diagnosis, even if your doctor fails to find anything wrong or says you are just experiencing anxiety. If you feel you are not getting the care you deserve, you can insist on a second opinion or you can change doctors.

Be honest about your health habits and be willing to make changes. Tell your health care professional if you don't exercise regularly, eat all the wrong foods, drink too much caffeine or smoke cigarettes (*exposure to second-hand smoke is a risk too!*).

Let all of your doctors know about every medication you are taking including over-the-counter drugs, birth control pills, vitamins, herbals and other supplements.

Record the doctor's instructions. You can take notes or bring a tape recorder. It may help to bring along a friend who can write down the doctor's instructions for you. Ask questions. Make sure you understand the plan of care so that you can participate in regaining your health.

Accepting responsibility for your own welfare, being pro-active and taking steps to improve healthcare communication with your doctor will result in better healthcare for you!

HEALTHY HEARTS PROGRAM
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