Make Those Doc Visits Count

HIV-positive nurse practitioner Richard Ferri, PhD, helps you get more out of your appointments.

January 1, 2009 By Richard Ferri, PhD

Have you ever left your doctor's* office feeling that you didn't get answers to some pressing questions? To live a long and healthy life, you need the support of your team of health care providers. If you're in good health, you may see the team only once every three months—and office visits may last only 20 minutes—so it's crucial to maximize each visit. As a nurse living with HIV and practicing HIV medicine, I face this challenge from both ends of the stethoscope. Here are some ways to improve medical appointments—beginning with a little demystification.

That white coat is not a Superman cape. Doctors are just people. If you feel intimidated by your provider, you are less likely to ask follow-up questions or insist on getting answers you understand. So talk to your doctor as you would to a friend.

Be ready. Before the appointment, make sure you've completed all tests prescribed at your last visit and confirm that results have arrived at your doc's office. A day or two before the appointment, make a list of all the items that are on your mind.

Give your doc a copy of your questions at the beginning of the visit—he or she may see that item No. 9, for example, puts item No. 1 in focus. But don't hesitate to mention your most burning issue first. It's hard to concentrate if your mind is focused on something you are anxious to discuss.

Review (or establish) your short- and long-term health care goals. If your lab numbers reflect a problem with your treatment, discuss an improvement strategy. If you have trouble with adherence, discuss the whys and what ifs. Don't just promise to do better; get your provider's help with a plan to do so.

Bring up symptoms. Be specific and get right to the point, limiting details ("I was on the bus last week when…") unless they suggest a cause for the symptom.

Mention side effects. If they make your life miserable, both you and your doc need to be willing to consider switching the meds that may be causing them. If a symptom bugs you, insist that the doctor take it seriously. If he or she can't offer a remedy, ask for a referral to someone—a nutritionist or physical therapist, say—who might be able to help.

Get care for your total health —not just your HIV. This virus is complex, with many pieces of the puzzle still unknown. Look beyond the lab numbers and review all your health needs (such as fatigue, high blood pressure, snoring, depression and loss of hearing or eyesight). You might ask your doc whether the problems you face are common among HIV-positive people.

Discuss all your meds, not just your HIV regimen. Make sure to understand why you are taking every drug you swallow—and discuss whether you really need each one. Your doc may be able to recommend health-improvement strategies that don't involve more pills.

Keep talking. If you don't understand something, or if something your doctor says just doesn't ring true, keep asking until you feel comfortable with the answers. This visit is for you. Ask for additional reading material or directions to a Web site if a subject concerns you.

Tell the truth. When you omit or lie about something—including recreational drug use, sexual behavior or family history—your doc ends up treating a patient who is not really you. Docs are not cops, and they are bound by law to protect your privacy. If you don't feel safe enough with your doctor to open up, it could be time to switch providers.

* *The term "doctor" refers to all primary care providers, including physicians, nurse practitioners and physician assistants.*

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