

How to be a good patient

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How to be a good patient

By Dr Brighton Chireka

I thought I should compile an article on how to be a good patient so that the doctors are able to diagnose some of the complicated problems that we may have. Doctors are professionals that are taught to do deal with different sorts of patients. They are trained to deal with a wide variety of patients starting with those that do not want to talk about their problems to those that come knowing exactly what they want from the doctor. In as much as these doctors are professionals who are trained to deal with any situation , we must understand that they are human who have emotions and feelings. We may push them to the limit and the end result is that the doctor and patient relationship can suffer to the extent of becoming irreparable. The sad end result will be the termination of that relationship with the patient having to find another doctor.

Here are some of the things that will make a difference when you visit your doctor;

1- Arrive in time for your appointment

It annoys most doctors if you turn up late for your appointment. It is always advisable to be at least 10 minutes early for your appointment. This will help if the doctor is running on time . Many a times doctors run late due to various reasons and my advice to you is that , do not let your timekeeping be the reason why the whole clinic end up running behind time. It frustrates the doctor and other patients who may have to reschedule their other appointments. Some other doctors will refuse to see you if you arrive late for your appointment so try to be in time. If you are running late it's better

to phone ahead and let them know at the surgery . Most doctors will see you if you do that as they know that we all get held up in traffic or by other life commitments. Do not make it a habit and be known for coming late for appointments . It is not in your best interest to be attended to by a frustrated doctor even if they might not show it.

2- Try to keep a diary for your problems

A doctors is not a " prophet " who has powers to know the hidden things about your problems. A doctor is able to come up with a possible diagnosis from just talking with you. Examination and tests will be done to confirm or rule out certain diagnosis that the doctor will have come up with from just talking with you. It makes the life of the doctor difficult if the patient does not know when the symptoms started , cannot explain the symptoms , does not know what makes it better or worse , cannot remember most things about the problem that has made him or her to come and see the doctor. At times the patient does not even answer the questions being asked by the doctor. I know the patient may have things that he or she want to get out of the chest . My advice in such situation is to answer the question asked by the doctor and then go on to add other issues that you want addressed or worried about. If the doctor is not giving you time to speak , feel free to ask for permission to say something . The doctor in most cases will realise his or her mistake of not allowing you to speak and will allow you to speak . In order to be able to answer most of the questions that your doctor is likely to ask I suggest that you keep a diary of your symptoms. The diary is for you to remind you and please do not just dump that diary to your doctor and expect him or her to give you a prescription. You do not need to present your diary , I suggest you read it before coming to see your doctor and only refer to it if you cannot remember certain things .

3- be honest

If ever there is a time to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God, it's when you are with any doctor. In the same line with having a diary , you need to be honest and admit if you do not know something. It's better to say that you do not know when your cough started than lying that it started yesterday when you have had it for more than 3 weeks. That lying may appear harmless to you but can result in the doctor making a wrong diagnosis or offering you wrong treatment. Many patients when in pain ,tend to overplay their symptoms and say that "nothing is touching " their pain. A detailed discussion will usually reveal that they have not even taken their pain killers regularly . Some would have just taken their pain killers in that last hour and are expecting quick results . If you exaggerate your symptoms the doctor may end up over investigating you. This may not be good for your health as some of the tests may put your health at risk. Also underplaying your symptoms is not good as well . Some people underplay their chest pain only to collapse with a heart attack later. My message is that just be honest about how you are feeling and answer all the questions truthfully not being afraid to say that you cannot remember certain issues. Keep things you cannot remember to minimum as the diagnosis depends on the information you give the doctor.

4- Be assertive but not rude

No one wants to work under duress so do not be rude to your doctor even if he or she is wrong.

Doctors are human so at times they may miss or not get what you are trying to say. My message is that try to put your case clearly without shouting or being vulgar. The doctor can terminate the consultation if he or she feels threatened or that the consultation is no longer achieving its purpose apart from raising tempers. Most doctors if running late will inform their receptionists to warn you about the delay. There is no need to have a go at the doctor for running late. It's better to use that time to have your medical problems sorted first and then make a complaint about the incident later. You cannot shout at the doctor, even calling him or her names and then expect to get proper treatment soon after the incident. Some patients know what they want but they get it wrong sometimes. One comes in and says to the doctor , "doc I have chest infection and I need some antibiotics". Some will be reluctant to answer any more questions the doctor may want to ask. A doctor will want to take a detailed story of your "chest infection " and even examine you before deciding on treatment. It is in your best interest to be able to answer the doctor and explain your symptoms as well as your views on the diagnosis and treatment. Feel free to tell your doctor your ideas about your symptoms and your concerns or worries about it. You should also tell your doctor what you expect him to do even if he may not agree with your plan. The doctor will discuss with you the possible diagnosis and treatment options allowing you to make an informed decision about the treatment plan to follow.

5-Know your medication

Please try to keep a list of medications you are taking and bring them to you doctor especially if it is a new doctor who do not have your records. As a Gp I cannot tell you how many patients I talk to who say, "Oh well I take a little square white pill and a pink one too" but cannot tell me what they are , what the dose is. It makes my life difficult but nowadays it's getting better as medical records are now slowly being shared in some places. Whichever way it is good to know what you are taking and why you are taking it.

In conclusion - do your part !

Most health problems are caused or made worse by our diet and lifestyles so we must take ownership of our health. We all struggle with bad habits such as smoking , alcohol abuse , eating junky food and lack of exercise. Doctors struggle with people who know the cause of their medical problems but are in denial. There are some who struggle with recurrent chest infections and come for antibiotics all the time but make no effort to stop smoking . Help on stopping smoking is usually denied making the doctor helpless. Some may struggle with breathing difficulties, arthritis of the joints and or diabetes but are not keen on exercise or eating a health diet. They just want tablets to do the "tricky" for them . It frustrates the doctor but they cannot say much as the patient will complain about being told off. My message is that as patients we need to do our part and compliment what our doctors are doing with us . There are simple things that we can do such as eating a health diet , exercising , cutting on alcohol, stopping smoking, giving paracetamol to our feverish children before seeing a doctor, if we can afford we should buy a thermometer and take the temperature of our ill children or even trying to give small amount of fluids more often to our children who are suffering from diarrhoea .

I know we are the " microwave" generation we want instant results. We change internet providers because their internet speed may be a few seconds slow. We must learn to accept that our bodies will take time to fight a viral illness . The illness will take its course which can be a week and we may feel unwell even if we try to take antibiotics. It's not helpful to demand antibiotics for viral infections as they do not work . We end up suffering from the side effects of the antibiotics. What is needed in most of these viral infections is for us to drink plenty of fluids, eat more fruits and vegetables and have enough rest waiting for the body to clear the infection.

This article was compiled by **Dr. Brighton Chireka** who is a GP and a Patient Engagement Advocate (PEA) in Folkestone Kent, UK. He is also an NHS Certificated Change Agent (CCA). You can contact him at: **info@docbeecee.co.uk**

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