Tips To Help A Senior Prepare For A Doctor Appointment

Taking your elderly loved one to the Doctor

For most of us, going to the doctor provokes some degree of anxiety. For the elderly, a doctor appointment often triggers emotional and physical overload. From filling out forms and sitting for long periods of time in the waiting room to changing into a patient gown and going through the doctor’s examination to understanding the diagnosis and treatment plan, it can be an overwhelming experience.

A study conducted by the Indiana University School of Medicine and the Regenstrief Institute validates the challenge. The study tracked nearly 7,000 primary-care patients age 65 or older at an Indianapolis geriatric clinic who were referred to a specialist. Only 71% of the patients ever scheduled their needed follow-up appointment. Michael Weiner, associate professor of medicine at Indiana University and director of the Regenstrief Institute’s Health Services Research Program, said “Some unscheduled appointments and no-shows could be attributed to patient forgetfulness or anxiety about disability, transportation or the time and effort it would take to attend an appointment, issues which might apply disproportionately to seniors.” He added, “The adverse consequences can be significant, whether resulting in a worsened medical condition or higher costs.”

In addition to Weiner’s conclusions, seniors also are challenged to compress their numerous health care concerns into a relatively brief time with the doctor. Various medical resources state that a patient has anywhere from 8 to 20 minutes per appointment.

Despite the hurdles, there are many easy ways to help your elder loved one prepare for a productive doctor appointment and maximize their limited window of time with the physician:

In advance of going to a physician for the first time, obtain and complete the “new patient” forms. This allows plenty of time to think and check on accuracy in a relaxed atmosphere. The first exchange when going to a doctor’s office is usually a receptionist plunking a clipboard full of forms in front of the patient. The forms often have small type, making them hard to read, and lines that are too short for the required information to be filled in. For a senior, this initial interface sets the wheels of confusion and frustration in motion. To help avoid this incident, the new patient to-be can call the doctor’s office and request that the forms be mailed to him/her in advance. With the forms already done upon arrival at the doctor’s office, the tone is set for greater calm.

For days or even weeks beforehand, if the appointment is that far away, write down symptoms and questions for the doctor. At home, keep a pen and paper on the kitchen table to write down everything. For a senior, it can be especially difficult to remember all they want to discuss with the doctor. Preparation is key. The kitchen table is a great place to keep a pen and paper handy to jot dot concerns as they cross the mind because it’s a spot that’s frequented throughout the day. Just prior to going to the doctor, the elder should review and prioritize the items on the list as well as take it with him/her to the appointment. Then, when the doctor asks, “How can I help you today?” and “What questions do you have?” the responses are ready and thorough. Creating such a list not only improves patient-doctor communication but helps the doctor make a diagnosis more quickly and accurately. And, it leaves more time for patient-physician discussion.
Bring a pen and paper to the appointment for taking notes. Interestingly, the International Listening Association reports that the average person has immediate recall of about 50% of what we have just heard, and we forget 50% of what we hear in 4 hours! Due to the aging process, seniors are sometimes even more memory challenged. By writing down information the doctor shares regarding diagnosis, treatment plan, next steps, and so forth, the elder patient will have better recall, be more apt to follow-through on the doctor’s orders, and have greater probability of better health results.

Practice the “buddy” system and take a companion. Don’t go there alone. Researchers at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore found that when patients have someone help them to help communicate, they are 50% more likely to be satisfied with their doctor’s ability to give information and 30% more likely to be satisfied with their doctor’s interpersonal skills. No matter how you slice it, for an elder person, a doctor appointment is ridden with stress. Having an extra set of “eyes and ears” with your loved one – be it a spouse, family member, friend or professional Patient Advocate, the additional person is yet another support mechanism to assure a more productive outcome both physically and emotionally. (Note: Instead of the patient taking written notes during the appointment, the companion can do this.)

Don’t be afraid to say to the doctor “I don’t understand.” Ask again and again, if necessary. It’s a patient’s right to get questions answered. Seniors are especially sensitive about being slow to comprehend and are easily embarrassed into silence. When doctors speak fast, use medical language, and rush through an appointment, the intimidation factor can soar. Assure your loved one that no question is silly or indicates lack of intelligence. It is his/her right to understand what’s going on with their body and the path prescribed by the doctor to managing or overcoming their health problems. If the doctor becomes impatient, the elder patient should ask the doctor if he has an assistant or nurse available to respond to additional questions.