



GET THE MOST FROM YOUR DOCTOR



Make your doctor's appointment count by being prepared with the right information and questions. By Lorraine Sathicq



Have you ever wasted time in your doctor's waiting room only to feel rushed, embarrassed or confused enough that when your turn finally comes you actually forget the real reason for your visit?

Given the time constraints – the average consultation is only 15 minutes long – some people leave their appointment feeling unheard or unsatisfied with the experience. But with a little preparation and smart thinking, it's possible to squeeze the most out of every visit with your GP.

GETTING AN APPOINTMENT

Advance bookings

Some days might be better than others for seeing your GP. Mondays are generally busy, so you might reduce your waiting time by scheduling your appointment for later in the week. Book earlier in the week if you know you're going to be waiting for test results because a Friday appointment might prolong your wait by two days.

If you're feeling unwell, it's always best to book an appointment in advance rather than waiting until you are really sick. Chances are, your doctor probably has a waiting list and may be

unable to see you on the same day unless it's a matter of urgency. This, of course, is open to interpretation, so while getting a medical certificate for those three sick days you had last week may seem urgent to you, medical centre staff might be more inclined to give priority to someone who is unwell now.

Ask the receptionist

Even if it usually takes a few days from the time of booking until you actually get to see your doctor, it's worth asking the receptionist if she can squeeze you in sooner or call you if there's a cancellation in the meantime. Medical practices generally allocate time for emergency same-day appointments and most receptionists are trained to

assess your problem and book your appointment according to urgency. If you're uncomfortable discussing your symptoms or medical history when making your appointment, it might help to know that confidentiality rules apply to reception staff too.

Book online

If you'd rather avoid phone queues or waiting for your medical centre to open for business to book an appointment, ask if your doctor has an online booking system. And if you really want to see a doctor without delay, you can find and book the next available appointment with a GP in your area from your computer or smartphone. Try healthengine.com.au or 1stavailable.com.au.



Speak up

If you have cold or flu symptoms, it's polite to let the reception staff know as soon as you arrive. There might be a separate waiting area to protect others from viral exposure. Dr Brian Morton, chair of the AMA Council of General Practice, says it's also important to speak up if you have symptoms such as bleeding, chest pain or breathing problems. If you're bringing a sick child to the doctor, it's worth letting staff know if they have symptoms like fever or earache that might move them up the waiting list.

**MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR 15 MINUTES****Prioritise**

If you want a Pap smear, a blood test, a skin exam and an explanation for your headaches all in the one visit, you're likely to be disappointed. However, Morton says there's no reason you shouldn't raise all your concerns with your doctor during your appointment. "You can't expect them all to be completely sorted in the one visit but it's a good idea to take a list if you have more than one thing to discuss," he explains.

"It's also reasonable to ask for a prescription renewal, even if you're seeing your doctor for something unrelated." This way, says Morton, you should leave with an answer to the issue that was worrying you the most and also a clear understanding of those that your doctor thinks should be tackled first.

Get to the point

You might know your doctor well enough to

engage in some friendly banter, but remember your time is limited. It may be that your visit is due to a specific series of events but you don't need to relate them in chronological order. "If your story starts with a stubbed toe and ends with a sprained wrist from

than honest about lifestyle issues like smoking or drinking could actually do you harm. Doctors are aware that people often fib about the number of cigarettes they smoke or the amount of alcohol they consume, but Morton says there's nothing to gain by lying.

Your doctor is not there to judge you – and you can be sure that there is very little you could say that your GP hasn't heard before

a subsequent fall, it's best to start with the actual injury and allow your doctor to ask questions about the circumstances as necessary," he explains.

Don't tell lies

Your doctor is not there to judge you – and you can be sure that there is very little you could say that your GP hasn't heard before, assures Morton. Avoiding your doctor's disapproval by being less

Also, if your doctor has prescribed medication you really have no intention of taking, be up-front about it and explain why. It's your life and your health, so you have the final say, but this discussion is important. There may be health consequences to ditching your prescription that you don't know about and there could also be other approaches to treatment that your doctor can recommend.

THINGS TO REMEMBER**What your doctor needs to know in the first five minutes:**

- * What's wrong?
- * How severe it is.
- * When it started.

- * What aggravates it or relieves it?
- * Whether your symptoms have worsened or spread to other areas.

What you need to know before you leave:

- * What your GP thinks is wrong.
- * Your treatment options and any alternative strategies.

- * How to use any prescribed medication.
- * How soon you can expect the treatment to work and what to do if it doesn't.