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How to Find a Doctor You Trust

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The best medicine happens when a doctor and patient collaborate on a plan to heal, feel better, and age better. Here's how to find a health practitioner you trust and get the most out of your checkups -- from doctor-patient duos who've made it work, in sickness and in health.

By Gail O'Connor and Alice Lesch Kelly
Photography by John Dolan

Picture this: Waking in the night with what feels like a flaming golf ball in your throat, you email your doctor to ask if you should be worried. By 8 a.m., you get her reply: She has noted your history of strep throat and suggests you come in. To many, that scenario -- a doctor who is actually reachable! Who knows your case record! -- may sound like an impossible dream. "Doctors today are doing the best they can, trying to find out what the critical issues are during regular exams," explains Woodson Merrell, M.D., chairman of the Department of Integrative Medicine at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City. "But with medicine overwhelmingly operating as a disease-management system, as opposed to a preventative and wellness system, doctors are missing a key piece: learning enough about a patient's lifestyle and habits, rather than just their symptoms. "This is where you come in: The most important step you can take for your own wellness is to forge a working relationship with a simpatico physician, and take charge of your health -- together. Such a partnership will have immediate results: In a 2007 survey, patients who said they had good communication with their doctors experienced fewer headaches, felt happier, and even had better blood-pressure readings. From these pages, learn how to get the care your body deserves -- and be inspired by our gallery of extraordinary doctor-patient pairs, who illustrate the power of working well together.

A Life-Saving Exam

Doctor

Patricia Yarberry Allen, M.D. (right), gynecologist, president of womensvoicesforchange.org

Patient

Dominique Browning (left), kidney cancer survivor

When Browning scheduled her first appointment with Dr. Allen, she was told to reserve three hours. "You need time to build a relationship," Allen says. While reviewing her history at the meeting, Browning mentioned that more than two decades earlier, at 26, she'd had kidney stones. Dr. Allen was surprised that her condition hadn't been further evaluated and suggested an ultrasound. When Browning put it off due to a hectic schedule, "Pat called me and asked, 'Have you done it yet?'" The results showed a mass on her kidney, which turned out to

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be cancerous. "She saved my life," Browning, a writer, says. Seven years later, they consider each other friends, and Browning has dedicated a book to Dr. Allen. "She is my advocate. Her primary focus is my health, and she will do what it takes to get me the best care and support whatever decisions I make," Browning says. "She has great instincts, and she follows up on them. And I know that no matter what, she has my best interests in mind."



An Open-Minded

Approach

Doctor

Benjamin Asher, M.D. (middle), integrative ear, nose, and throat physician

Patients

Yolanda Edwards (left), recovering from Lyme disease, and her daughter, Clara (right)

When Edwards brought her 8-year old daughter, Clara, to Dr. Asher for fluid in her ears, his thoughtful, cautious approach made an impression. He exhausted less-invasive treatment options before recommending inserting tubes. Edwards sought his help for herself when she was struggling with side effects of an antibiotic regimen for chronic Lyme disease, and again his response was reflective and considered. "There was a long pause, and he went into another room to call a colleague," she says. "I loved that he didn't feel like he needed to come up with an immediate answer. The ability to be humble shows confidence." Says Dr. Asher: "I learn from patients all the time and I'm always seeking out new information. It's rooted in curiosity." He now treats the entire family. "He's intuitive; we feel a close bond with him," Edwards says of her unlikely health ally. "It's important to have strong connections to specialists as well as to primary-care doctors. I ask around, and I go out of my insurers' network if I have to. I value those relationships and will give up other things to see a doctor that I deeply trust."

Take Charge of Your Relationship

To get good care, you have to look for it, work at it, and know when it's time to make a change. See how your doctor-patient connection measures up.

Love Who You See, See Who You Love

The right physician can make such a difference to your overall well-being that it's worth the effort to nurture that relationship -- or find someone else. No matter what kind of doctor you're seeing, there are certain traits associated with good care and positive outcomes.

They're Team Players

Compassionate doctors are open to other disciplines of medicine. "They recognize the possibility that other practitioners out there may be doing things they're not," Dr. Merrell says. And

communication is key. "They talk to the other care providers the patient may be seeing," says Julie T. Chen, M.D., an integrative physician in San Jose, California.

How to Take Charge: Help open the lines of communication between your doctor and other professionals you're consulting: Ask your alternative practitioner to write a letter of introduction to your primary-care physician explaining how she's treating you.

They Take Time To Listen

Think of how it feels when you're really heard. You're able to complete a long thought. Your concerns are mirrored back. And yet 72 percent of physicians interrupted their patients' opening statement within an average of 23 seconds, according to a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. "From the doctors' side, we're used to being rushed, and we feel pressure to simply tell you what's wrong and what to do about it," says Martha Howard, M.D., a physician in Chicago. She turned to integrative medicine 25 years ago after becoming frustrated in a practice that allowed only 15-minute visits. The problem, Howard says, is that hurrying toward a diagnosis can end up depriving a doctor of key clues to a patient's ailment.

How to Take Charge: Make sure you're listening. The golden rule applies to patients, too. Also, at the beginning of the visit, tell your doctor you have questions -- this will alert her that you're expecting to discuss your issues. Bring two copies of your list of questions, so you can go over your concerns together.

They Avoid Condescension

Does your doctor dislike it when you bring in an Internet printout? Or dismiss questions? There's a reason good bedside manners matter to your health: Patients who are treated with dignity and respect are more likely to stick to their doctors' recommendations and to get preventive services, according to a 2005 survey published in the Annals of Family Medicine.

How to Take Charge: Often it's time pressure that makes a doctor appear brusque. Acknowledge that you know she is busy, but explain that you have concerns you want addressed. Simply doing that may change the tenor of the conversation.

Is She Dr. Right?

What's almost never acceptable? If your doctor disappoints on one or more of the following fronts, it may be time to start looking for another health partner.

A Doctor Who Makes You Feel Judged

You can't be compliant with someone who won't hear you out. Skip a doctor who interrupts or stereotypes, or otherwise makes you feel uncomfortable speaking freely about your symptoms and care.

A Rude Office Staff

Do you love your doctor but feel slighted by the receptionist or intimidated by a nurse? If others in her practice consistently treat you badly, speak to your doctor before you decide to find someone new. Ultimately her staff's behavior is a reflection on her.

An Unreliable System

Do you show up for a scheduled appointment, only to be told it's not on the books? Are you the one to follow up for test results? Are your messages getting to the doctor? Important information can fall through the cracks when an office is disorganized. Your care -- and your sanity -- are worth more.

Excuses, Excuses

We all know "those" couples, the ones who make us scratch our heads and wonder: What is she doing with him? (Or vice

versa.) The same can apply to doctor-patient relationships. "Usually, people simply don't know who else to turn to, so they'll stay with somebody they're not comfortable with," says Dr. Chen. See if any of the following rationales apply to you.

Excuse

"This doctor was with me through my pregnancies. How could I leave her now?"

Excuse Buster

"Maybe the doctor worked well with you 5 or 10 years ago," says Alicia Stanton, M.D., an integrative physician in Enfield, Connecticut. "But if your needs have changed, you're putting loyalty above your health -- and that's no reason to continue to stick with her."

Excuse

"I really don't have anyone else near me to go to."

Excuse Buster

"Sometimes, depending on where you live, there aren't many convenient choices nearby," Dr. Stanton concedes. But consider another option: Keep your not-so-perfect doctor for emergencies and illnesses, and travel to a better match for care in between.

Excuse

"I never get sick, so it doesn't matter if my doctor is a good fit."

Excuse Buster

It's easy to forget the importance of this relationship when you only see your doctor once a year -- until you actually do need her because you're sick or have a concern. Then you have a double whammy: a health worry and the stress of inadequate care. The best time to look for a new doctor is when you're well and can make an informed decision.

Take Charge of Your Chart

Sure, it's great to have an army of doctors, but seeing multiple providers raises the odds that details may be lost and can even cause medical errors. Try these tips to marshal your info so your M.D. will get your full story -- STAT.

Four Surprising Things Your M.D. Needs to Know

Every doctor has intake forms and asks certain questions, but there are some details that you should offer unsolicited. Past symptoms can help your doctor determine your current risk for common problems such as cancer. "Making a diagnosis is like putting the pieces of a puzzle together," says Archelle Georgiou, M.D., chief clinical officer of empowher.com, a health media and advocacy company. "Your history holds clues that help explain symptoms and future risks."

Your Uncensored History

You're used to having doctors ask you whether your relatives had heart disease, but some of their other questions may surprise you. Susan Blum, M.D., an integrative doctor in Rye Brook, New York, asks about work hours and stress; Dr. Allen inquires about how many places patients lived as kids. "Understanding where a patient is coming from helps to foster better communication."

Your Menstrual History

Your first period may have happened long ago, but your doctor needs to know when. "Early menstruation -- before age 12 -- is a risk factor for breast cancer," Dr. Georgiou says, because it means you've had a longer-than-average lifetime exposure to estrogen. "And late menstruation may be a signal that a woman was undernourished in her teens, which raises the risk of

osteoporosis later in life."

Your Environmental History

Being in contact with secondhand smoke, lead, workplace chemicals, polluted air, and toxins -- even if it was a while back -- can impact your health, so be sure to share it. If you grew up on a farm, for example, you may have had an unusually high exposure to pesticides. These toxins can contribute to a range of symptoms, including fatigue, headaches, memory and balance problems, and conditions such as allergies, diabetes, and perhaps even cancer, according to Walter Crinnion, M.D., author of "[Clean, Green and Lean](#)." (Learn how to create an environmental history at wholeliving.com/toxicpast.)

Your Personal, Private Past

A history of abuse or other trauma can manifest as physical symptoms years later. Women who were abused as children have a higher risk of developing health problems like irritable-bowel syndrome, heart disease, and ulcers. For example, half of women with fibromyalgia, a condition that causes chronic pain and fatigue, may have been abused in early childhood, report Duke University researchers. And trauma, such as ongoing neglect, abuse, or exposure to violence, can actually alter gene expression, according to a 2010 report by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, and influences how the brain responds to stress later in life, Georgiou says. Don't let embarrassment silence you. Doctors typically ask about social history midway through the first meeting. "Bring it up in a brief comment such as, 'There is something you should know. I was abused earlier in my life, and I know this can trigger certain symptoms,'" Georgiou says.

Forty-seven percent of Americans would consider switching doctors for a practice that offered the ability to complete important health-care tasks like getting lab results online, according to a recent survey from Intuit Health.

A Permanent Record

Unless you do it yourself, no one is compiling all of your medical information (test results, diagnoses, and treatment details) into a single repository. A personal health record enables you "to maintain a lifelong account that is more complete than any single provider's office charts," says John D. Halamka, M.D., chief information officer at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. "Organize your records and be ready to pull out what you need," says Peter A. Ubel, M.D., a physician and behavioral scientist at Duke University. "It will help your doctor better understand your prior treatment, and you'll get better care." Keeping a PHR has immediate benefits, says Jennifer B. Nelson, D.O., an osteopath at James Island Medical Care in Charleston, South Carolina: You'll communicate better with caregivers, and save time and money by preventing duplicate testing. A PHR also makes it easier to get a second opinion, change doctors, and see specialists. Perhaps most important, says Nelson: "It encourages the patient to become more of a participant in her care." You can create a low-tech PHR by taking notes and collecting printouts of test results, treatment plans, and other info in a binder. Rebecca Saltiel Busch, R.N., author of *Personal Healthcare Portfolio*, recommends dividing info into four sections: financial (bills and insurer statements); clinical (ongoing concerns, a list of meds, and providers' contacts); history (test results, treatment specifics, pregnancy and delivery details, and immunization dates); and legal (health care proxy). When tests are ordered, request written reports be sent to you for your PHR. You can also use online tools like myphr.com or Microsoft HealthVault. To be safe, get privacy policies in writing.

A Mutual Respect

Doctor

Richard Ash, M.D. (right), internist and founder of the Ash



Center for
Comprehensive
Medicine

Patient

Latham Thomas
(left), prenatal
wellness expert
and yoga
instructor

As a practitioner
herself, it was
important to
Thomas to have

a doctor whose beliefs were harmonious with her own. She hadn't seen an M.D. for years because, she says, "I wasn't convinced I'd find one who shared my holistic values and would be accessible." On a friend's recommendation, she decided to try Dr. Ash. It was apparent from the start that they had similar visions for health. "The staff greet you by name, talk to each other, and smile. It's clear they walk the walk. You feel well taken care of and empowered," Thomas says. "The questions Dr. Ash asked me were the same ones I would ask my own clients." When she came down with the chicken pox the night before going out of town, Dr. Ash called her at 11 p.m. to set up a strategy so she could treat herself with supplements while traveling and speed recovery. "When I came home five days later, I was nearly fully healed thanks to him."



An

Integrative Cure

Doctor

Susan Blum, M.D. (right), chronic disease specialist, founder of the Blum Center for Health

Patient

Irene Mays (left), suffered from debilitating arthritis, acid reflux, and headaches

At Mays's first visit with Dr. Blum, they talked for nearly two hours -- about her life, family history, and the specifics of her arthritis and other painful symptoms. "You have to be very present when you're listening to a patient's story," Dr. Blum says. "She needs to know she is safe and can share really personal information." Mays felt that previous doctors were merely listening for keywords so they could make a quick diagnosis. "None of those doctors got to the root of my symptoms," she says. After her first visit, Dr. Blum diagnosed her with food allergies and a gluten intolerance, and she encouraged Mays to change her diet and take supplements. Mays's well-being has since improved dramatically. "Within a week of that visit, I woke up for the first time in six years without pain. I felt like I was heard. And because I was heard, I was helped. "

Take Charge of Your Face Time

You don't see your doctor that often (hopefully), so you want to make the most of every visit. Here's how to ensure you don't leave the office with any lingering questions and even how to be a favorite patient (yes, really).

Having "The Talk" With Your Doc

Some conversations can be oh-so-awkward that we avoid them -- and risk shortchanging our own health care. We asked doctors for some tactful but effective scripts -- what to say to make our points clear. "Just asking questions respectfully can go a long way toward good doctor-patient communication," says Dr. Merrell. "It needs to be a partnership in which you can have conversations rationally." Here's how to make some common uncomfortable encounters more constructive -- and less cringe-worthy.

You Want A Second Opinion

Patients feel uncomfortable telling their doctors they plan on consulting someone else, but they shouldn't. "As physicians, we're used to patients seeing other doctors, because we offer referrals," Dr. Chen points out. "When it's approached in a collaborative way, most won't be offended."

TRY: "I value your input and want to continue care with you, but I'd like to seek out another opinion on this issue. Can you recommend someone for me to talk to?"

You Have Reservations About The Treatment

"I have a lot of patients who don't take my advice -- I'm sure many doctors do," says Glen Stream, M.D., in Spokane, Washington, president elect of the American Academy of Family Physicians. "I believe in honest communication. If the doctor is giving advice and thinks the patient is going to follow it, but the patient thinks it's not in her best interest, she should say so."

TRY: "I have some doubts about this treatment. Can you suggest other possibilities we might look into?"

She Recommends Something You've Tried Before -- That Didn't Work

Dr. Chen suggests being honest but also keeping an open mind. "If a patient has an objection, I may say, 'We won't do anything you're uncomfortable with. Now that you're coming to me, I'll try to find out why it didn't work and we can go from there and explore other treatment options.'"

TRY: "I'm apprehensive because I've tried that treatment before. What will be different this time?"

Your Doc Doesn't Take Your Insurance

Some doctors, particularly certain specialists, may not accept your insurance -- or any insurance. That doesn't necessarily mean you can't be reimbursed, partially or fully, for certain services and treatments, so call your insurance company. Request full itemized receipts from your visits so you can properly submit your claims.

TRY: "Have some of your patients had success with their insurance companies covering these costs?"

Face, Phone, or Email

Effectiveness of care increased up to 6 percent in patients who had email access to their doctors, a recent study found.

Although some offices have been slow to embrace email, when they do, here's how to determine the best method of communication.

A Quick Guide:

When You Have

Recurring symptoms -- seasonal allergies or a rash that's back
What To Do

Email. Your doctor may encourage you to try at-home or over-the-counter remedies that have worked for you before, and to keep her in the loop about whether you get better.

When You Have

Follow-up questions about symptoms or treatments from a recent visit

What To Do

Call. Subtleties are best addressed voice-to-voice and can sometimes be answered more quickly by the office nurse.

When You Have

Multiple or unusual symptoms

What To Do

Make an appointment. Anything out of the ordinary requires in-person communication and examination.

How to Be a Great Patient

Medicine is a two-way street. You want to like your physician -- and you want him or her to like you -- and therefore be invested in your health. We asked doctors for insight about what motivates -- and frustrates -- them when dealing with patients. Here's an Rx to get on their good side:

Be Prepared

"The best care is delivered with the most complete information available," Dr. Stream says. If you have a special condition like diabetes and are supposed to monitor your blood sugar, bring the readings to your doctor visit. Ditto for lab work requested on previous visits.

Forgot To Ask Something?

Don't put off that call. "Patients often have questions after they leave the exam room. It's easier for the physician to give you an answer while your visit is still fresh in her mind," says S. Hughes Melton, M.D., a family physician in Lebanon, Virginia. "Waiting even a day or two means your physician will have to review his or her notes, and all that takes time." And, if you wait until your next appointment you may be putting your health in jeopardy.

Say What You Think

The days of "doctor knows best" are long over. "Patients know their bodies -- they know what a big deal is, like pain in the leg they haven't had before," Dr. Stanton says. "Patients who stand up for themselves get better care."

Be Nice!

Most workplaces can get gossipy. The doctor's office is no exception, and if you complain loudly and, well, rudely, the office will notice. Try a humanistic approach -- "I'm going on vacation; would you mind calling in a refill?" -- instead of being pushy.

Take Charge of Your Missing Links

Are you really covered? To ensure you get the care you deserve, you may have to take these extra -- yet extremely worthwhile -- steps.

Five Screening Tests You May Need to Request

Your GP should alert you to the basics (cholesterol checks, Pap smears) that you need at milestone ages. (For an updated list, visit healthywomen.org or download their free app, "Passport to Good Health.") It often can take years for tests to become

routine though, so you may not have been offered these important ones yet.

Breast MRI

Breast cancer is most treatable when it is found early; the American Cancer Society recommends yearly mammograms beginning at age 40. However, women with a high risk of developing breast cancer should consider adding magnetic resonance imaging, which can provide highly detailed images of tissue.

Who Should Ask About It: MRIs find some cancers that mammograms miss, and vice versa, so the ACS recommends an MRI for women who have a strong family history of the disease or are otherwise at high risk.

Hemoglobin A1C

High A1C numbers can help determine whether you have diabetes or prediabetes. An ordinary blood sugar test measures the amount of glucose in the blood at the moment it's drawn. But blood-sugar levels can vary significantly based on what you ate, how much you exercised, and even how stressed you feel that day. The hemoglobin A1C test can give a more accurate sense of your levels over time by measuring average blood sugar over the previous two to three months.

Who Should Ask About it: The American Diabetes Association recommends this screening if you are over 45, overweight, sedentary, or have a family history of diabetes.

Thyroid Test

An endocrine gland located near your voice box, the thyroid makes hormones that influence almost every organ in your body. When it produces too little thyroid hormone, a condition known as hypothyroidism, metabolism slows, leading to weight gain, depression, or other symptoms. Hypothyroidism is especially common in women, but many go undiagnosed and suffer unnecessarily. A simple blood test can measure function; treatment is a daily thyroid-hormone replacement pill.

Who Should Ask About It: Those with hypothyroid symptoms and women over 35

HPV Test

Human papillomavirus infection is a sexually transmitted disease that is responsible for most of the 12,000 cervical cancer cases each year. However, most who are infected don't know it. That's why it's key to get an HPV DNA test along with your Pap. If you test positive, your M.D. can take steps to help prevent cancer.

Who Should Ask About It: Women age 30 or older

25-Hydroxy Vitamin D Test

Without enough bone-strengthening D, your risk of osteoporosis increases. If results of this blood test show you need more, your doctor may recommend boosting your levels with supplements.

Who Should Ask About It: Anyone at risk for osteoporosis, including women with a history of eating disorders and postmenopausal women.

Going Out of Network

You've heard about a great doctor -- who doesn't take your insurance. Check your OON deductible and what, if any, percentage of costs will be covered, and consider:

Asking For A Discount:

Some doctors reduce rates for OON patients. No go? Request an installment payment plan.

Appealing:

Insurers may pay OON expenses in some cases: if a network specialist isn't local, for example, or doesn't provide certain treatments. Learn more by pursuing preapproval.

The Hole in Your Health Care

If you only see a primary-care provider, you may be missing out on helpful treatments, says Victoria Maizes, M.D., of the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona. PCPs can provide good frontline care, but they are less likely to have the experience and the knowledge a specialist would offer for certain conditions. Consider adding these to your team.

Traditional Chinese Medicine Providers use herbs, acupuncture, and other practices to balance the body's energy and treat a variety of conditions, including hot flashes, moodiness, and sleep problems. "TCM recreates a sense of balance that allows the body to heal," Dr. Maizes says. Learn more at tcmdirectory.com.

Naturopathic Doctors use both natural healing methods and

comments

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