

Taking Charge of Your Health Care

No one can make you go to the doctor or practice healthy habits. However, when you know how to learn more about taking care of yourself, it will be easier for you to make decisions that are best for your personal health. The following tips will help keep you on track:

Use available resources. If you have a medical condition, know that you are at risk of developing one or want to learn how to stay healthy, do the necessary research. Consult your doctor. Go to the library. Use the Internet—many Web sites offer information on basic preventive medicine, as well as facts about diseases and illnesses. On the Web or even in the phone book, you may find organizations that offer free or low-cost health information.

Keep records. Keeping your own notes about inoculations and tests (as well as the test results) in a small notebook or on a card in your wallet can save a lot of worry when you go to the doctor. In addition, find out how often you need to have each inoculation and make a note of it in your records; keeping track will help ensure that your inoculations are up to date. You may also wish to keep copies of your medical records. This will be especially useful if you move or change doctors.

Ask questions of doctors and pharmacists. Many people see health care professionals as too busy to take the time to answer questions. You are important. Ask what you need to know to allay your fears. You may find it helpful to make a list of questions before you go; if you feel nervous, you can simply refer to your list. If you are seeing a doctor about a certain illness, be sure to ask the doctor if any new treatments are available.

Know which drugs you are taking. Always ask the doctor what each prescription is for and how to use it properly. Be sure to tell the doctor about all medicines you are taking to avoid dangerous drug interactions. You can also ask your pharmacist about drug interactions and proper dosing. Keep a list of all the medications you are taking, and when you go to the pharmacist, be sure that the prescription you pick up is yours. Further, do not change the dosages yourself or share your prescriptions with anyone.

Get tested. Ask your doctor or do some research to find out which tests you should have. For example, have you had a TB test recently? Hepatitis A and B vaccines? Have you had a tetanus booster? Ask about a pneumonia vaccine if you are elderly or have lung problems.

Have check-ups at regular intervals. If you are not sure if you need to see specialists such as ophthalmologists, cardiologists or gynecologists, or how often you ought to go to these specialists, ask your general practitioner. She can also tell you how often you should have a general physical examination. If you are in good health, you don't need to have a check-up every year, but pay attention to any unusual physical symptoms that could require medical attention.

Strive to be physically fit and healthy. Exercise regularly, maintain proper weight and eat a well-balanced diet. If you smoke, consider speaking to your doctor about ways to quit. Wash your hands regularly to prevent colds.

Parents should keep track of their children's medical histories and take them to the doctor when necessary. As an adult, however, you must be your own "parent." You know your medical history and the intricacies of your body better than any medical practitioner, and you must take the necessary steps to safeguard your health.

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