

Seven Blessings for Doctor Visits

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Some of these suggestions are from my uncle, who wishes to remain anonymous. He accompanied my aunt on her journey through cancer for nearly eight years. Along the way they had many doctors' appointments. They sought out many second opinions and got to know many doctors. These are based on their experiences as well as my own in helping my parents and my wife through illness and treatment.

1. Do Your Research

Before you see the doctor (or even before you make an appointment) look up the doctor's license and background and verify that he or she actually treats your condition. After that, realize that just because someone does treat a particular condition that doesn't mean that doctor actually *likes* what they do. Some seem unhappy with their choice of career, which causes them to be impatient with patients like you. This leads into points 2 and 3.

2. Write down your questions beforehand.

Better yet, (since the average doctor will feel intimidated by patients who are holding with a page full of questions) memorize your questions. Make sure the patient goes with a second person who can take notes and ask questions if needed.

In the first visit, tell the doctor about your symptoms. Listen carefully to the physician's response. He or she should be clear in talking about a possible diagnosis, their experience with such situations, and what they might do about treatment. They should ask you plenty of questions and be "hands on" with you.

For my aunt and uncle, a second interview with the same doctor would be the test: what did that person have to say, what are his or her thoughts about treatment, which hospital to go into. Signs of a good doctor are:

- The doctor will draw out and write out explanations for you.
- The doctor will talk in detail about previous experience with similar situations.
- The doctor will know about new equipment, new approaches, or new medications that can help you.

3. Don't be afraid to speak up.

Some doctors welcome questions and conversation. Some are on a tight schedule and don't have the time. But they are here for *you*, not the other way around. If they are leaving and you still have a question, tell them as much: "Excuse me, could I ask one more thing?"

Gauge their response. Evaluate their body language. Do they look you in the eye when they talk? Do they seem friendly? Do they "lean into" you, or are they distracted and looking away?

If they ignore you, you might consider another doctor. If they suggest you talk to their nurse or make another appointment, evaluate that (and talk to the nurse to get their opinion). If they take the time to provide more explanation or a quick response despite lack of time, that's a sign of a doctor who is interested in you, who feels good about what they want to do, and who wants to help people, and who has flexibility with time management.

4. Ask for explanations of what you don't understand.

Doctors can be hard to comprehend. They often use technical jargon, abbreviations, or speak quickly. If your doctor says something you don't understand, you have to be assertive. Interrupt them and ask what that term or abbreviation means. How they respond to you can yield useful information.

See if your doctor is friendly and easy to communicate with. How much time does he give you? On Medicare a patient typically only gets 15 minutes of time. If he is good and likes patients, he will go over the 15 minutes.

When you ask a question, no matter what phase you are in, the good doctor will come back with good answers and tell you about it. The one who does not let you interrupt, and who does not have a good response, may not be the best doctor for you. Remember that you can always go to different specialists and get ideas and different opinions—including second opinions.

5. Do your homework on YouTube or elsewhere.

Research your symptoms or your illness on YouTube or elsewhere. Keep in mind that you are after general knowledge. Not everything you see or read will apply to you. And much of the information you read online focuses on the most dramatic, serious, and scary cases of a particular illness or injury. It almost seems as though medical websites are out to scare people and engender fear.

Don't be alarmed by this. You are after knowledge so you can ask good questions and make good decisions. Don't be afraid: knowledge is power.

6. Talk to nurses.

In any medical institution, the nurses are the ones who know what is really going on. And in general, nurses are the easiest to approach. Ask nurses what they think about a particular doctor—or if that seems too direct, ask why a particular doctor seems hurried or preoccupied or overwhelmed. You might find that the person is going through a divorce or moving into a new house, for instance.

7. You are in charge and you have agency.

Many patients leave everything up to the doctor and do everything he or she says without questioning. This is giving up agency for your own health. Remember, you are in charge of your health care. You have a right to make decisions, evaluate, seek other opinions, and change your course of treatment.

One aspect of this is being able to ask the tough questions:

- “What would you do if you were in my situation?”
- “What do you think about my getting a second opinion?”
- “Are there any other options you're not telling me about?”

Such questions might be scary to bring up. The fact that they are scary means they are important to you and good to discuss.

Don't feel you need to make a decision right away. It is not uncommon to feel pressure to do something immediately. It never hurts to step back and sleep on a decision and get a new perspective.