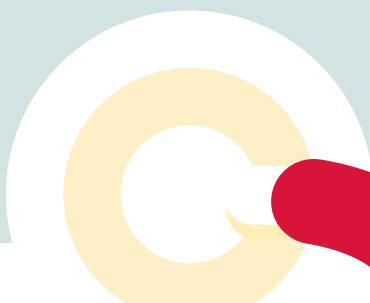


A Guide for Older Adults

# TALKING WITH YOUR DOCTOR

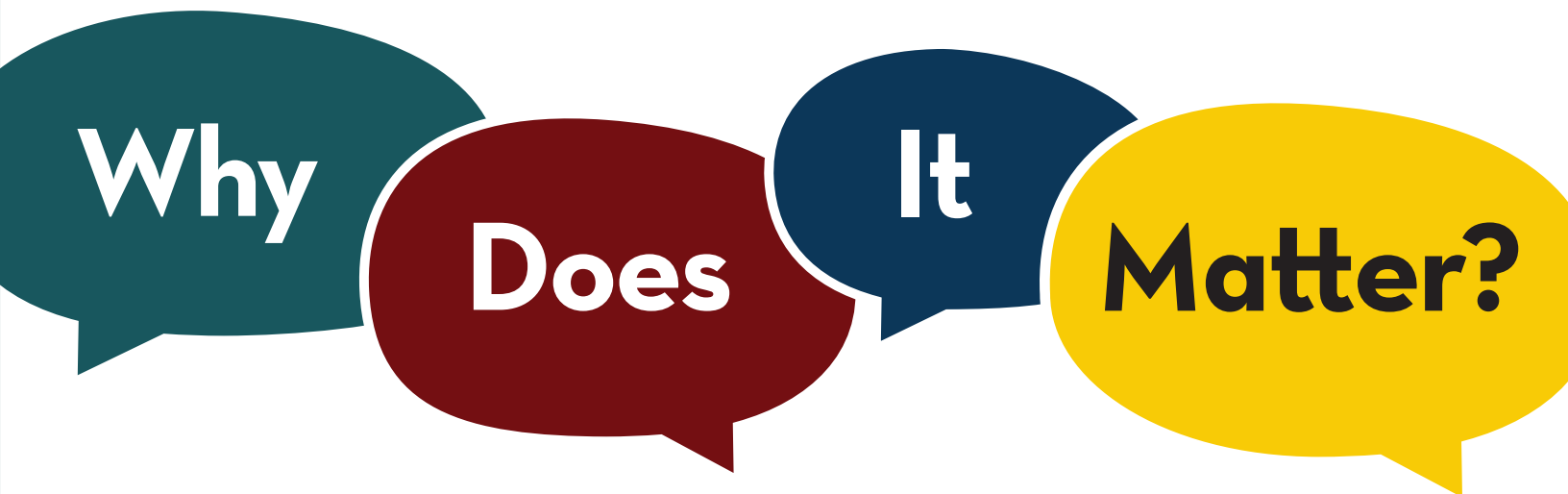


National Institute  
on Aging

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# Opening Thoughts



**How well you and your doctor talk with each other is one of the most important parts of getting good health care. But talking with your doctor isn't always easy. It takes time and effort from both of you.**

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In the past, the doctor typically took the lead and the patient followed. Today, a good patient-doctor relationship is a partnership. You and your doctor work as a team, along with nurses, physician assistants, pharmacists, and other health care providers, to manage your medical problems and keep you as healthy as possible.

This means asking questions if your doctor's explanations or instructions are unclear, bringing up problems your doctor may not ask about, and letting him or her know if you have concerns about a treatment or change in your daily life. Good communication between you and your doctor is key to being satisfied with your care and taking care of your health.

All of this is true at any age, but especially when you're older. Talking often and openly with your doctor is key to your quality of life. You may have more health conditions and treatments to discuss. And because your health has a big impact on other parts of your life, your quality of life needs to be talked about too.

## Getting Started

# Choosing a Doctor You Can Talk With

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Finding a primary doctor (or primary care doctor) whom you feel comfortable talking with is the first step in good communication and can help ensure your best possible health care. This doctor gets to know you and what your health is normally like. He or she can help you make medical decisions that suit your values and daily habits. Your doctor can also keep in touch with other medical specialists and health care providers you may need.

If you don't have a primary doctor or are not at ease with the one you currently see, now is the time to find a new doctor. Whether you moved to a new city, changed insurance providers, or had a bad experience with your doctor or medical staff, it is worthwhile to spend time finding a doctor you can trust.

People sometimes hesitate to change doctors because they worry about hurting their doctor's feelings. Most doctors understand that different people have different needs and know that it is important for you to have a doctor with whom you are comfortable.

Primary care physicians frequently are family practitioners, internists, or geriatricians. A geriatrician is a doctor who specializes in older adults, but family practitioners and internists may also have a lot of experience with older patients. Here are some suggestions that can help you find a doctor who meets your needs.

## Decide What You Are Looking for in a Doctor

A good first step is to make a list of qualities that matter to you.



### Ask yourself if it is important that your doctor:

- Is a man or a woman?
- Speaks your language?
- Has an individual practice or is part of a group?
- Has evening or weekend office hours?
- Has a conveniently located office with adequate, free parking? Has an office in a building with an elevator? On a bus or subway route?
- Accepts your insurance or Medicare or Medicaid?
- Supports clinical research?
- Is associated with a specific hospital or medical center?
- Is board certified? In what field?

After you make your list, go back over it and decide which qualities are most important and which are nice, but not essential.

## Identify Several Possible Doctors

Once you decide what you are looking for, ask friends and relatives, medical specialists, and other health professionals for the names of doctors with whom they have had good experiences. Rather than just getting a name, ask about the person's experiences. For example, ask:

“ What do you like about Dr. Singh? ”

and “ Does this doctor take time to answer questions? ”

A doctor whose name comes up often may be a strong possibility.

If you belong to a managed care plan — a health maintenance organization (HMO) or preferred provider organization (PPO) — you may be required to choose a doctor in the plan or you may have to pay extra to see a doctor outside the network. Most managed care plans will provide information on their doctors' backgrounds and credentials. Some plans have websites with lists of participating doctors from which you can choose.

Develop a short list of doctors you can choose from. As you find out more about the doctors on your list, you may rule out some of them. For instance, a doctor may not be taking new patients and you may have to make another choice.

## What Does “Board Certified” Mean?

Doctors who are board certified have extra training after regular medical school and have passed an exam certifying their expertise in one or more specialty areas. The American Board of Medical Specialties has a database that is updated daily of all board-certified physicians at [www.certificationmatters.org](http://www.certificationmatters.org). You can also call toll-free to verify a doctor's certification at 866-275-2267.

## What Are HMOs and PPOs?

Members of an **HMO** pay a monthly fee no matter how many (or few) times they see a doctor. Usually, there are no deductibles or claims forms, but they may have a copayment for doctor visits and prescriptions. Each member chooses a primary care doctor from within the HMO network. The primary care doctor coordinates all care and, if necessary, refers members to specialists.

A **PPO** is a network of doctors and other health care providers. The doctors in this network agree to provide medical services to PPO health plan members at discounted costs. Members can choose to see any doctor at any time. Choosing a non-PPO provider is called “going out of network” and usually costs more than seeing a member of the PPO network.

## Consult Reference Sources

The American Medical Association's Doctor Finder website (<https://doctorfinder.ama-assn.org/doctorfinder/home.jsp>) can help you find doctors in your area. These websites don't recommend individual doctors, but they do provide a list of doctors you may consider. MedlinePlus has a comprehensive list of directories ([www.medlineplus.gov/directories.html](http://www.medlineplus.gov/directories.html)) that may also be helpful. For a list of doctors who participate in Medicare, visit [www.medicare.gov/physiciancompare](http://www.medicare.gov/physiciancompare). You may consider calling your local or state medical society to make sure the doctor is in good standing.

# Learn About Doctors You Are Considering

Once you have narrowed your list to two or three doctors, call their offices.

The office staff is a good source of information about the doctor's education and qualifications, office policies, and payment procedures.



## Your questions for the office manager may include:

- Is the doctor taking new patients?
- Does the doctor accept my insurance? Medicare or Medicaid?
- What days/hours does the doctor see patients in the office?
- Will I always see my doctor, or will I see other health care providers, such as a nurse practitioner (NP) or physician assistant (PA)?
- Are there times set aside for the doctor to take phone calls? Is there a charge for this service? Does the doctor use telehealth (video or phone) visits with patients?
- Can I email questions to the doctor?
- Does the doctor ever make house calls?
- How far in advance do I have to make appointments? What is the appointment cancellation policy?
- What happens if I need care after hours or on weekends?
- How do I reach the doctor in an emergency?

It is also important to know if the doctor's office offers different types of appointments, such as:

- Lab visits for bloodwork
- Visits for vaccines for travel, seasonal flu, pneumonia, COVID-19, or shingles
- Telehealth visits with the doctor, NP, or PA

## What Is Telehealth?

Telehealth is a service that uses video calling and other technologies to help you see your doctor or other health care provider from home instead of at a medical facility. Telehealth may be particularly helpful if you have limited mobility or live in a rural area. Talking with your doctor online or through a phone, tablet, or other electronic device can often be easier, faster, and less expensive than making a trip to an office.

Telehealth can also help support family caregivers who are taking care of their loved ones either close by or from afar. If a caregiver needs to ask the doctor a question, he or she can do so through an online health portal rather than waiting for and traveling to an in-person appointment. For more information about telehealth, see *Telehealth: What Is It, How To Prepare, Is It Covered?* ([www.nia.nih.gov/health/telehealth-what-it-how-prepare-it-covered](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/telehealth-what-it-how-prepare-it-covered))

Pay attention to how the office staff responds to your questions — you will need to communicate with them often!

Now you are ready to make an appointment to meet and talk with a doctor you are considering. He or she is likely to charge you for this type of visit. After the appointment, ask yourself if this doctor is a person with whom you could work well. Your first meeting is a good time to talk with the doctor and the office staff about some communication basics.

When you see the doctor and office staff, introduce yourself and let them know by what name you prefer to be called. For example:

“Hello, my name is Mrs. Martinez.” or

“Good morning, my name is Bob Smith. Please call me Bob.”



**To learn about a doctor, consider asking questions such as:**

- What are your thoughts about treating older patients?
- How do you feel about involving my family in care decisions?
- When I have questions, what is the best way to ask? Do you charge for telephone or email time?
- What are your thoughts about complementary or alternative treatments?
- Do you participate in clinical research or would you recommend a clinical trial for my condition?

See Worksheet 2: Questions to Ask Your Doctor, on pages 41–42 for a list of questions to consider when choosing a new doctor.



**When deciding which doctor to choose, you might want to ask yourself questions such as:**

- Was I comfortable talking with the doctor? Did the doctor answer my questions?
- Was the doctor really listening to me? Did the doctor keep eye contact?
- Could I understand what the doctor was saying? Was I comfortable asking him or her to say it again?
- Is the office staff welcoming, knowledgeable, and helpful?

If you are not satisfied after your visit, schedule a visit with one of your other candidates.

## Your First Appointment

Once you've chosen a doctor, make your first actual care appointment. It is best to see your new doctor when your health is stable. Having a physical exam is the ideal way for your new doctor to get to know you. However, health insurance companies generally only pay for a complete physical once a year. In addition to a physical exam, your new doctor may review your complete medical and family history. Be sure to bring your medical records or have them sent from your former doctor. Create a health history that includes your conditions, and the conditions of your parents and siblings, to bring with you. See Worksheet 3: Changes to Discuss, on pages 43–44 and Worksheet 4: Concerns, on page 45 for examples. Also bring a list of your current medicines with their dosages and number of times you take them each day. Alternatively, put all your medicines in a bag and take them with you. Use Worksheet 5: Medications, on page 47 to create a complete list of the medications, vitamins, and supplements you take.

## Summary

### Choosing a Doctor You Can Talk With

- **Decide what you are looking for in a doctor.**
- **Identify several possible doctors.**
- **Consult reference sources, including those online.**
- **Talk to office staff to learn more about the doctors you are considering.**
- **Consider talking with the doctor by phone, online, or in person to discuss becoming his or her patient.**
- **Make a choice.**

## How Should I Prepare?

# Getting Ready for an Appointment

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Make the most of your appointment, whether you are starting with a new doctor or continuing with the doctor you've seen for years. The following tips will make it easier for you and your doctor to cover everything you need to talk about.

## List and Prioritize Your Concerns

Make a list of what you want to discuss. It is best to prioritize the list so you and your doctor can discuss the topics most important to you first. Put your most important concerns at the top of the list. For example,

- Do you have a new symptom you want to ask the doctor about? Take the time to make some notes about your symptoms before you call or visit the doctor.
- Do you want to get a shot to protect you from the flu, pneumonia, or shingles?
- Are you concerned about how a treatment is affecting your daily life?

Medical appointments average about 15 to 20 minutes, so ask your most important questions right away! Worksheet 3: Changes to Discuss, on pages 43–44 of this booklet can help.

## Take Information With You

Bring a list of your medications, including the dose and time you take each prescription drug, over-the-counter medicine, vitamin, and herbal remedy or supplement. Or simply bring a bag that contains everything you take so the doctor can review your medicines. Take your insurance cards, names and phone numbers of other doctors you see, and your medical records if the doctor doesn't already have them.

You may want to ask the doctor to send you all the forms you will need to complete for your visit, including:

- Health history
- Health insurance
- Health information privacy (HIPAA) agreement

The office staff can send the forms to you attached to an email message so you can print them at home, or they may be able to send the forms in the mail. That way, you can take your time completing the forms at home, where you will have all the information you need. If you have problems understanding how to fill out any of the forms, ask for help. The doctor's office staff and some community organizations can help.



## Consider Bringing a Family Member or Friend

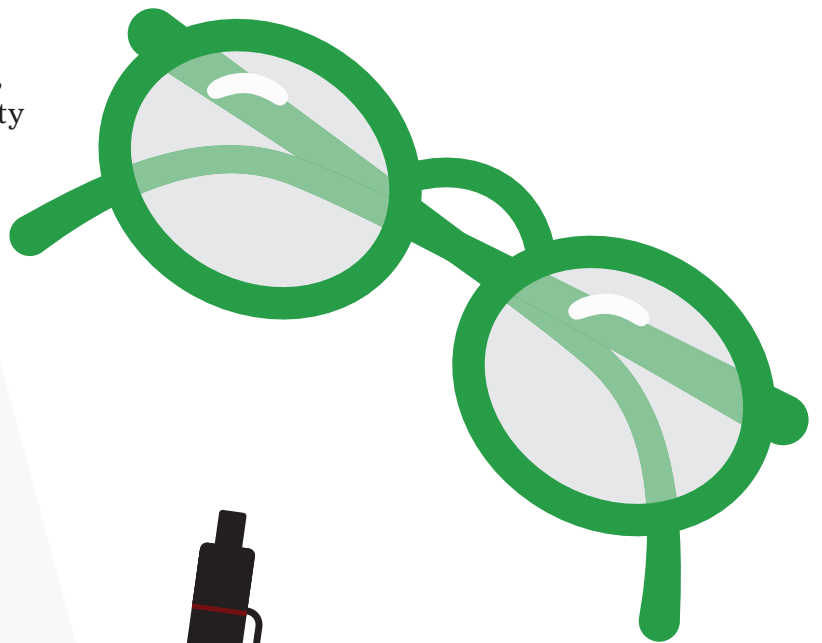
Sometimes it is helpful to bring a family member or close friend with you. Let that person know in advance what you want from your visit. Your companion can remind you what you planned to discuss with the doctor if you forget. He or she can also take notes for you and help you remember what the doctor said.

If a relative or friend helps with your care at home, bringing that person with you to your doctor visit may be useful. In addition to the questions you have, your caregiver may have concerns he or she wants to discuss with the doctor. Caregivers may find it especially helpful to discuss what to expect in the future, sources of information and support, community services, and ways they can maintain their own well-being.

## Be Sure You Can See and Hear as Well as Possible

Many older adults use glasses or need aids for hearing. Remember to take your eyeglasses to the doctor's visit. If you have a hearing aid, make sure that it is working well and wear it. Let the doctor and staff know if you have a hard time seeing or hearing. For example, you may want to say:

“ My hearing makes it hard to understand everything you're saying. It helps a lot when you speak slowly. ”



## Plan to Update the Doctor

Let your doctor know what has happened in your life since your last visit. Tell the doctor right away if you have been treated in the emergency room, seen by a specialist, or had an illness. Mention any changes you have noticed in your appetite, weight, sleep, energy level, or managing everyday care like bathing or brushing your teeth. Also tell the doctor about any recent changes in any medications you take or the effects they have had on you. Worksheet 5: Medications, on page 47 of this booklet can help.

## Request an Interpreter if You Know You'll Need One

If your doctor doesn't speak your language, ask the office staff to provide an interpreter. Call the doctor's office ahead of time because they may need to plan for an interpreter from the same area or country to be available for you. For example, a Chinese interpreter may speak Cantonese or Mandarin. Ensuring that you can easily understand and talk with the interpreter is important for getting good care.

## Resources in Spanish

If you are looking for written information in Spanish, there are resources that can help. For example, the National Institute on Aging (NIA) has brochures and fact sheets on a variety of health and aging topics. To get copies of these free publications, call 800-222-2225 or order them online at <https://order.nia.nih.gov>.

## Using an Interpreter

- Consider telling your interpreter what you want to talk about with your doctor before the appointment.
- If your interpreter does not come from the same country or background as you, try to use universal terms to describe your symptoms and communicate your concerns.
- Make sure your interpreter understands your symptoms or condition so that he or she can correctly translate your message to the doctor.
- Always let the doctor, your interpreter, or the staff know if you do not understand your diagnosis or the doctor's instructions. Don't let language barriers stop you from asking questions or voicing your concerns.

## Summary

### Getting Ready for an Appointment

- **Be prepared: Make a list of physical and mental health concerns to take with you.**
- **Take your health history and medication information with you.**
- **Bring a family member or friend to listen and take notes.**
- **Make sure you can see and hear as well as possible.**
- **Plan to update the doctor on what has happened since your last visit.**
- **Request an interpreter from the same area or country if you need one.**

## What Can I Say?

# Giving Information

Talking about your health means sharing information about how you feel physically, emotionally, and mentally. Tell the doctor about your illnesses, operations, medical conditions, and other doctors you see. Knowing how to describe your symptoms and bringing up other concerns will help you and your doctor be partners in your health care. Worksheet 3: Changes to Discuss, on pages 43–44, and Worksheet 4: Concerns, on page 45 of this booklet can help.

## Share any Symptoms

A symptom may reflect a disease or disorder in the body or in the mind. Examples of body symptoms include pain, itching, shortness of breath, or having a hard time sleeping. Symptoms of the mind may include feeling sad, anxious, or depressed. Other symptoms of the mind can be feeling confused, disoriented, or unable to concentrate. Take the time to make some notes about your symptoms before you call or visit the doctor. Worrying about your symptoms is not a sign of weakness. Being honest about what you are experiencing doesn't mean that you are complaining. The doctor needs to know how you feel.

Be clear and brief when describing your symptoms but tell the doctor the details about them. Your description helps the doctor identify the problem. A physical exam and medical tests provide valuable information, but your experience of your symptoms points the doctor in the right direction.



### Questions to ask yourself about your symptoms:

- What exactly are my symptoms?
- Are the symptoms constant? If not, when do I experience them?
- Does anything I do make the symptoms better? Or worse?
- Do the symptoms affect my daily activities? Which ones? How?

## Give Information About Your Medications

It is possible for medicines to interact, causing unpleasant and sometimes dangerous side effects. Your doctor needs to know about ALL medicines you take, including over-the-counter (nonprescription) drugs and herbal remedies or supplements. Make a list or bring all your medicines with you. Don't forget about eye drops, vitamins, and laxatives. Tell the doctor how often you take each. Describe any drug allergies or reactions you have had. Say which medications work best for you. Be sure your doctor has the phone number of the pharmacy you use. Worksheet 5: Medications, on page 47 of this booklet can help.

# Tell the Doctor About Your Habits

To provide the best care, your doctor must understand you as a person and know what your life is like. The doctor may ask about where you live; what you eat; how you sleep; what you do each day; your everyday care routine such as bathing, brushing your teeth, and dressing; what activities you enjoy; what your sex life is like; and if you smoke, drink, or use drugs. Be open and honest with your doctor. It will help him or her to understand your medical conditions fully and recommend the best treatment choices for you.

## Voice Other Concerns

Your doctor may ask you how your life is going. This isn't being impolite or nosy. Information about what's happening in your life may be useful medically. Let the doctor know about any major changes or stresses in your life, such

as a divorce or the death of a loved one. You don't have to go into detail; you may want to say something like:

“ It might be helpful for you to know that my sister passed away since my last visit with you. ” or

“ I recently had to sell my home and move in with my daughter. ”

## Summary

### Giving Information

- Share any symptoms.
- Give information about your medications.
- Tell the doctor about your habits.
- Voice other concerns.



## Make Good Use of Your Time



### Tips

**Decide what questions are most important** — Pick three or four questions or concerns that you most want to talk about with the doctor. You can tell him or her what they are at the beginning of the appointment, and then discuss each in turn. If you have time, you can then go on to other questions.

**Stick to the point** — Although your doctor might like to talk with you at length, each patient is given a limited amount of time. To make the best use of your time, stick to the point. For instance, give the doctor a brief description of the symptom, when it started, how often it happens, and if it is getting worse or better.

**Be honest** — It is tempting to say what you think the doctor wants to hear, for example, that you smoke less or eat a more balanced diet than you really do. While this is natural, it's not in your best interest. Your doctor can suggest the best treatment only if you say what is really going on. For instance, you might say:

“ I have been trying to quit smoking, as you recommended, but I am not making much progress. ”

**Share your point of view about the visit** — Tell the doctor if you feel rushed, worried, or uncomfortable. If necessary, you can offer to return for a second visit to discuss your concerns. Try to voice your feelings in a positive way. For example, you could say something like:

“ I know you have many patients to see, but I'm really worried about this. I'd feel much better if we could talk about it a little more. ”

**Remember, the doctor may not be able to answer all your questions** — Even the best doctor may be unable to answer some questions. Most doctors will tell you when they don't have answers. They also may help you find the information you need or refer you to a specialist. If a doctor regularly dismisses your questions or symptoms as simply a part of aging, think about looking for another doctor.

## What Can I Ask?

# Getting Information

Asking questions is key to good communication with your doctor. If you don't ask questions, he or she may assume you already know the answer or that you don't want more information. Be proactive. Don't wait for the doctor to raise a specific question or subject; he or she may not know it's important to you. Ask questions when you don't know the meaning of a word (like aneurysm, hypertension, or infarct) or when instructions aren't clear (for example, does taking medicine with food mean before, during, or after a meal?).

## Learn About Medical Tests

Sometimes, doctors need to do blood tests, X-rays, or other procedures to find out what is wrong or to learn more about your medical condition. Some tests, such as Pap tests, mammograms, glaucoma tests, and screenings for prostate and colorectal cancer, are done regularly to check for hidden medical problems.

Before having a medical test, ask your doctor to explain why it is important, what it will show, and what it will cost.



### Other questions to ask about medical tests:

- Why is the test being done?
- What steps does the test involve? How should I prepare?
- Are there any dangers or side effects?
- How will I find out the results? How long will it take to get the results?
- What will we know after the test?

When the results are ready, make sure the doctor tells you what they are and explains what they mean. You may want to ask your doctor for a written copy of the test results. If a specialist does the test, ask to have the results sent to your primary doctor.

## Can I Find Information About Medical Tests Online?

Yes — MedlinePlus, from the National Library of Medicine at the National Institutes of Health, provides links to many trustworthy resources. Visit [www.medlineplus.gov/laboratorytests.html](http://www.medlineplus.gov/laboratorytests.html). You can get information on preparing for lab tests, explanations of different tests, and tips on interpreting lab test results.

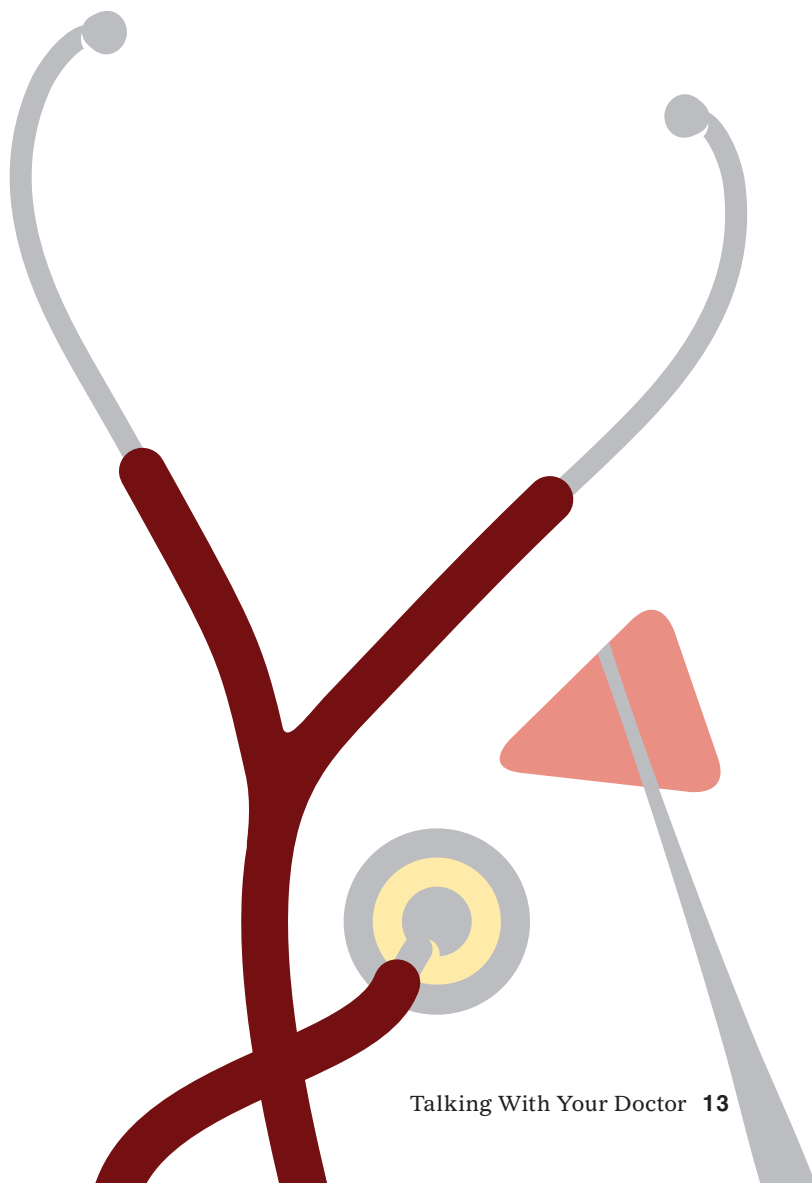
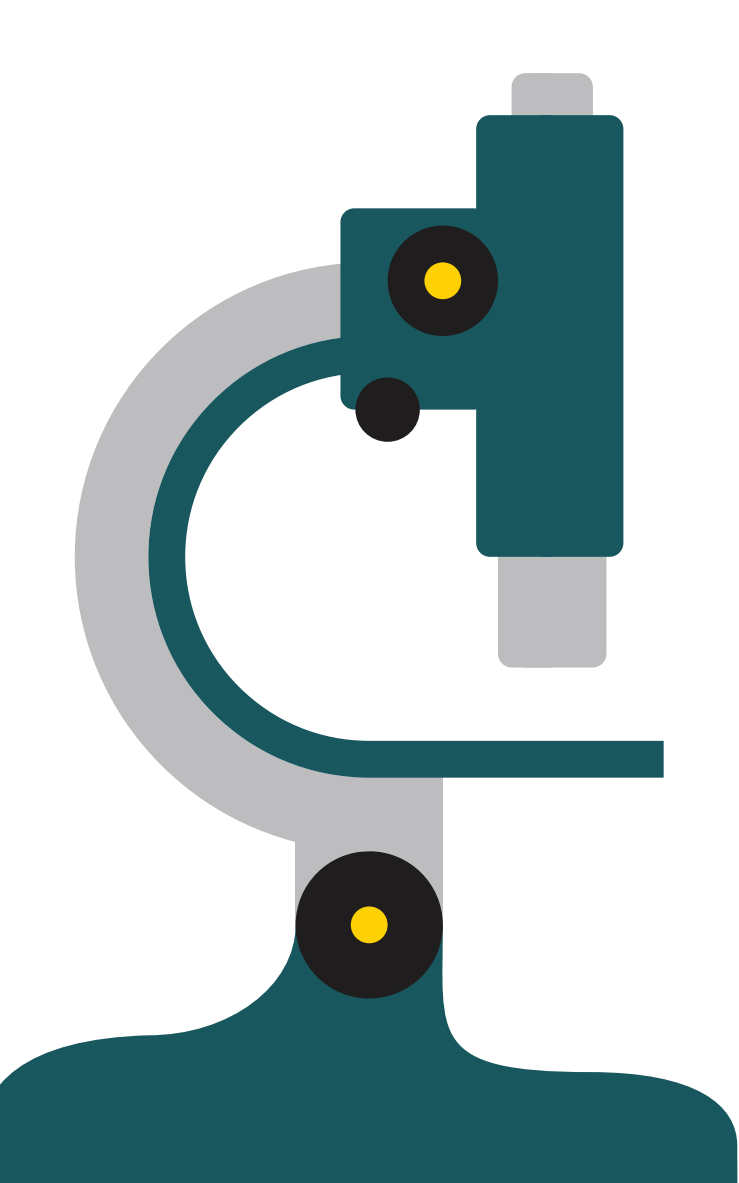
## Discuss Your Diagnosis and What to Expect

A diagnosis identifies your disease or physical problem. The doctor makes a diagnosis using your signs and symptoms and the results of the physical exam, laboratory work, and other tests. Ask the doctor to tell you the name of the condition and why he or she thinks you have it. Ask how it may affect you and how long it might last. Some medical problems never go away completely. If they can't be cured, they can be treated or managed. If you understand your medical condition, you can help make better decisions about treatment. Knowing what to expect may make it easier for you to manage the condition.



### Questions to ask about your diagnosis:

- What may have caused this condition? Will it be permanent?
- How is this condition treated or managed? What will be the long-term effects on my life?
- How can I learn more about my condition?
- Is there a clinical trial or research study that I can join? See page 21 to learn more about clinical trials.



# Find Out About Your Medications

Your doctor may prescribe a drug for your condition. Make sure you know:

- The name of the drug
- Why it has been prescribed
- How often and for how long you should take it

Ask the doctor to write the name of the drug for you. Make notes about any other special instructions such as how to take the medicine or which food or drink to avoid while you are taking the medicine. If you are taking other medications, make sure your doctor knows what they are, so he or she can prevent harmful drug interactions.

Sometimes, medicines affect older people differently than younger people. It is important to tell the doctor if your medicine doesn't seem to be working or if it is causing problems or side effects. Do not stop taking the medicine on your own. Doing so may cause you more problems. Check with your doctor before stopping your medicine.

If another doctor (for example, a specialist) prescribes a medication for you, let your primary doctor know. Also, call to check with

your doctor's office before taking any over-the-counter medications. You may find it helpful to keep a chart of all the medicines you take and when you take them. See Worksheet 5: Medications, on page 47 of this booklet.

The pharmacist can also answer questions and help you select over-the-counter medications. Because your pharmacist keeps records of all prescriptions you get filled at that pharmacy, it is helpful to use the same store regularly. At your request, the pharmacist can fill your prescriptions in easy-to-open containers and may be able to provide large-print prescription labels.



## Questions to ask about medications:

- When will the medicine begin to work?
- What are the common side effects? What should I pay attention to?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- Should I take it at meals or between meals? Do I need to drink a whole glass of water with it? What time(s) of day should I take it?
- Are there foods, drugs, or activities I should avoid while taking this medicine?
- Will I need a refill? How do I arrange that?

## What Are Side Effects?

“ My headache prescription always makes me sleepy. ”

“ Aunt Sarah's cough syrup gave her a rash. ”

Side effects are unwanted or unexpected symptoms or feelings that happen after taking a medicine.

Drugs approved by the Food and Drug Administration are expected to have greater benefits than risks. However, all drugs have potential side effects. Many side effects are minor, others are more serious, and a few can

be life-threatening. Some side effects happen just when you start taking a medicine. Some happen only once in a while and you learn how to manage them.

Before you use any medicine, read the pharmacy label and any stickers that may be attached to the prescription bottle. The label and stickers have information on how to take the drug and possible side effects. Always read the label and package insert for over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, or herbal supplements, too.

Some side effects may make you want to stop taking the medicine. Tell your doctor if this happens. He or she may be able to prescribe a different medicine or help you deal with these side effects in other ways.



# Understand Your Prescriptions

When the doctor writes a prescription, it is important that you can read and understand the directions for taking the medication.

If you have questions about your prescription or how you should take the medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist. If you do not understand the directions, make sure you ask someone to explain them. It is important to take the medicine as directed by your doctor.

## A Note About Prescription Pain Medicine

Never take more opioid medicine than the doctor prescribes. By doing so, you risk becoming addicted. Anyone can become addicted to pain medicine. Read more about opioids and prescription pain medicines in *Pain: You Can Get Help* at [www.nia.nih.gov/health/pain-you-can-get-help](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/pain-you-can-get-help). You can learn more about using medicines safely from the National Institute on Drug Abuse at [www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov).

Worksheet 5: Medications, on page 47 of this booklet can help.

## Common Abbreviations for Prescriptions

Doctors and pharmacists often use abbreviations or terms that may not be familiar. Here is an explanation of some of the most common abbreviations you will see on the labels of your prescription medications.

Abbreviation	Explanation
p.r.n.	as needed
q.d.	every day
b.i.d.	twice a day
t.i.d.	three times a day
q.i.d.	four times a day
a.c.	before meals
p.c.	after meals
h.s.	at bedtime
p.o.	by mouth
ea.	each

## Summary

### Getting Information

- Learn about medical tests.
- Discuss your diagnosis and what you can expect.
- Find out about your medications.
- Understand how to take your prescriptions.



# Make the Most of Your Appointment

Often, medical appointments are short but full of information. To make the most of your appointment and understand what your doctor is saying, ask about anything that does not seem clear. For instance, you might ask:

“ I want to make sure I understand. Could you explain that a little more? ” or

“ I do not understand that word. What does it mean? ”

Another way to check is to repeat what you think the doctor means in your own words and ask,

“ Is this correct? ”

Here are some other ideas to help make sure you have all the information you need.

**Take notes** — Take along a notepad and pen and write down the main points. Or, if you bring along a family member or friend, ask them to take notes. Many doctors print information for their patients to take home, or you can ask the doctor to write down the information for you. If you can't write while the doctor is talking to you, make notes in the waiting room after the visit. Or, bring an audio recorder to record what is said. Always ask the doctor if

it's okay to record your conversation before starting the recorder. Taking notes or recording your conversation is especially helpful if you want to share the details of the visit with others.

**Get written or recorded materials** — Ask if your doctor has any brochures or other materials about your health conditions or treatments. For example, if your doctor says that your blood pressure is high, he or she may give you brochures explaining what causes high blood pressure and what you can do about it. Ask the doctor to recommend other sources, such as websites, disease management centers, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies that may have written or recorded information you can use. Download or order NIA's free print publications on aging at <https://order.nia.nih.gov>.

**Talk to other members of the health care team** — Sometimes, the doctor may want you to talk with other health professionals who can help you understand and manage your condition. Gerontologists, pharmacists, case managers, and occupational or physical therapists may be able to spend more time working with you than the doctor can.

**Call or email the doctor** — If you are uncertain about the doctor's instructions after you get home, call the office. A nurse or other staff member can check with the doctor and call you back. Some doctors or other health professionals have an email address or online health portal you can use to send questions.

## How Can I Be Involved?

# Making Decisions With Your Doctor

Giving and getting information are two important steps in talking with your doctor. The third big step is making decisions about your care.

## Find Out About Different Treatments

You will benefit most from a treatment when you know what is happening and are involved in making decisions. Make sure you understand what your treatment involves and what it will or will not do. Have the doctor give you directions in writing and feel free to ask questions. For example:

“What are the pros and cons of having surgery at this stage?” or

“Do I have any other choices?”

If your doctor suggests a treatment that makes you uncomfortable, ask if there are other treatments that might work. If cost is a concern, ask the doctor if less expensive choices are available. The doctor can work with you to develop a treatment plan that meets your needs.

Here are some things to remember when deciding on a treatment:

- **Discuss choices.** There are different ways to manage many health conditions, especially chronic conditions like high blood pressure and cholesterol. Ask what your options are.

- **Discuss risks and benefits.** Once you know your options, ask about the pros and cons of each one. Find out what side effects might occur, how long the treatment would continue, and how likely it is that the treatment will work for you.
- **Consider your own values and circumstances.** When thinking about the pros and cons of a treatment, don't forget to consider its impact on your overall life. For instance, will one of the side effects interfere with a regular activity that means a lot to you? Is one treatment choice expensive and not covered by your insurance? Doctors need to know about these practical matters so they can work with you to develop a treatment plan that meets your needs.



### Questions to ask about treatment:

- Are there any risks associated with the treatment?
- How soon should treatment start? How long will it last?
- Are there other treatments available?
- How much will the treatment cost? Will my insurance cover it?
- Are there any research studies or clinical trials studying treatments for my condition?

Learn more about clinical trials on page 21.

# Learn About Prevention

Doctors and other health professionals may suggest you change your diet, activity level, or other aspects of your life to help you manage medical conditions. Research has shown that these changes, particularly getting more exercise and eating well, have positive effects on overall health.

Preventing disease is especially important for older adults. We know that it's never too late to stop smoking, improve your diet, or start exercising. Getting regular check-ups and seeing other health professionals, such as dentists and eye specialists, helps promote good health. Even people who have chronic diseases, like arthritis or diabetes, can prevent further disability and, in some cases, control the progression of these diseases.

If a certain disease or health condition runs in your family, ask your doctor if there are steps you can take to:

- Help prevent it
- Manage it
- Keep it from getting worse

If you want to discuss health and disease prevention with your doctor, say so when you make your next appointment. This lets the doctor plan to spend more time with you.



## Questions to ask about prevention:

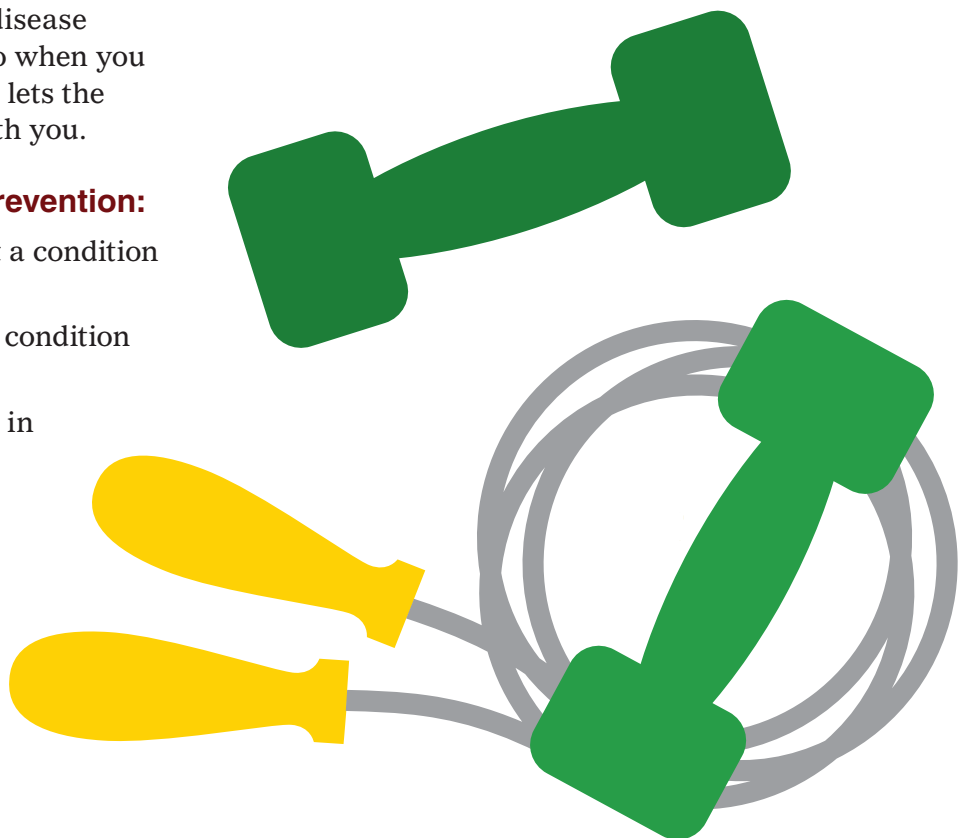
- Is there any way to prevent a condition that runs in my family?
- Are there ways to keep my condition from getting worse?
- How will making a change in my habits help me?
- Are there any risks in making this change?
- Are there support groups or community services that might help me?

It is just as important to talk with your doctor about lifestyle changes as it is to talk about medical treatment. For example:

“ I know that you've told me to eat more dairy products, but they really disagree with me. Is there something else I could eat instead? ” or

“ Maybe an exercise class would help, but I have no way to get to the senior center. Is there something else you could suggest? ”

As with treatments, consider all the alternatives, look at risks and benefits, and remember to consider your own point of view. Tell your doctor if you feel his or her suggestions won't work for you and explain why. Keep talking with your doctor to come up with a plan that works.



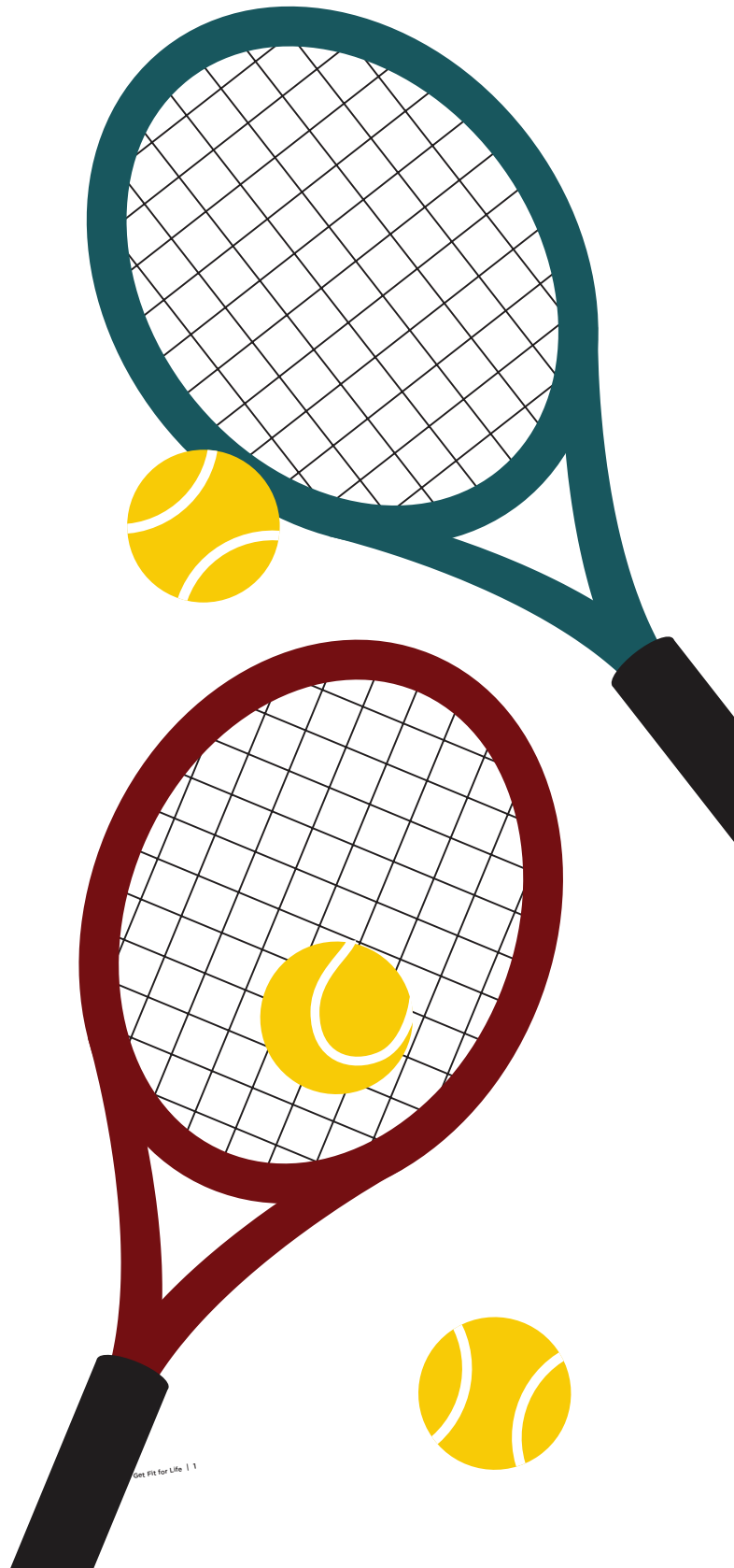
# Talking About Exercise and Physical Activity

Exercise and physical activity are often “just what the doctor ordered” to:

- Help you have more energy to do the things you want to do
- Help maintain and improve your physical strength and fitness
- Help improve mood and reduce feelings of depression
- Help manage and prevent diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, some types of cancer, osteoporosis, and disabilities as you grow older
- Help improve your balance and prevent falls

Many doctors now recommend that older adults try to make exercise and physical activity a part of everyday life. Add these to your list of things to talk about with your doctor. Ask how they would benefit you, if there are any activities you should avoid, and whether your doctor can recommend any specific kinds of exercise.

Visit [www.nia.nih.gov/health/exercise-physical-activity](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/exercise-physical-activity) or call 800-222-2225 (toll-free) for information about the health benefits of exercise and physical activity for older adults, along with safety tips and activity ideas.



# Evaluating Health Information Online

Many people search online to find information about medical problems and health issues. However, not all health information on the internet is of equal quality. How do you find websites that are accurate and reliable? The following questions may help when you look at a health-related website:

- Who is responsible for the content? Is it a government agency (.gov), national nonprofit organization, or professional association? An individual? A commercial organization?
  - Who wrote the information? If you are reading an article or blog, what are the author's credentials? Is the author affiliated with any major medical institutions or with a specific product?
  - Who reviews the material? Is there a medical or scientific advisory board that reads the medical content before it is made available to the public?
  - Are sources cited for the statistical information? For example, it's easy enough to say "four out of five doctors agree..." but where did that statistic come from?
  - Is the purpose and goal of the sponsoring organization clearly stated?
- Is there a way to contact the sponsor for more information or to verify information presented?
  - Is the site supported by public funds or donations? If it includes advertisements, are they separate from the content?
  - When was the information written? Because health information can become outdated quickly, it's important to know the source and date for the information.
  - Does the site have a clear privacy policy? If you must register, is it clear how your personal information will be used?
  - Is the website trying to sell you something or promising quick cures?

**Remember to talk with your doctor about what you've learned online.**

For more information about evaluating health information online, see NIA's *Online Health Information: Is It Reliable?* at [www.nia.nih.gov/health/online-health-information-it-reliable](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/online-health-information-it-reliable).

## Summary

### Making Decisions With Your Doctor

- **Ask about different treatment options, including clinical trials.**
- **Ask about prevention.**
- **Talk about exercise and lifestyle.**
- **Evaluate online health information.**

## Asking More Questions

# Talking With Your Doctor About Clinical Trials

You may have heard about clinical trials and studies in the news, or you might be interested in how you can be part of advancing medical science. As an active partner with your doctor in your health care, talk with your doctor about your interest in participating in clinical research. Research studies that involve people are typically of two types: an observational study where scientists simply make measurements of people in everyday life, or a clinical trial where researchers test a medical, surgical, or behavioral intervention.

## Safety, Benefits, and Risks of Clinical Trials

Nearly everyone 18 years or older can participate in clinical research. Researchers need participants who represent all races and ethnicities, genders, geographic locations, and sexual orientations.

### ✓ **The benefits of participating in a clinical trial may include:**

- Having a more active role in your own health care
- Being treated for a disease before treatment is available to everyone else
- Helping others get a better treatment for their health problems

- Having more medical care and more frequent health check-ups as part of your treatment
- Getting more information about support groups and other resources

Researchers must follow strict rules enforced by the federal government to make sure every clinical trial participant is safe. Before a trial can begin, the detailed study plan is carefully reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board made up of doctors, scientists, and people like you who make sure study participants are safe, and potential risks are as low as possible. Each trial participant reviews the study plan with a member of the research team so they know what to expect and what may happen during the trial. This is called the “informed consent process” and it helps protect each participant.

### ⚠ **The risks of participating in a clinical trial may include:**

- Having serious or uncomfortable side effects from a treatment
- Finding the treatment has no effect or is no better than a standard treatment
- Being inconvenienced by many medical appointments, travel to the study site, or hospitalizations

If you decide to participate in a clinical trial, you may leave the trial at any time and for any reason. Your personal and health information will be kept private.

# Types of Clinical Trials

Some studies are designed for or include healthy people who want to help find ways to prevent a disease, such as one that may be common in their family. You may also volunteer to participate in an observational study in which researchers collect data about a group of people through medical exams or questionnaires over time to learn more about the associations of different lifestyles with aging, memory, and other topics. Or you may be interested in participating in a clinical trial of a new diet, medical device, or drug for a condition or illness you have. Other clinical trials test ways to prevent a health problem or find a disease before there are symptoms. You may also be interested in a clinical trial that studies the role of caregivers or support groups.

If you learn about clinical research opportunities in your area through mailings or flyers, bring them to your appointment with your doctor. Support groups and websites that focus on a particular condition may have lists of clinical studies. Also, you may see newspaper or TV ads for trials in your area.

In addition to talking with your doctor, you can search [ClinicalTrials.gov](https://clinicaltrials.gov) (<https://clinicaltrials.gov>) or sign up for a registry or matching service to connect you with trials in your area. For more information about participating in Alzheimer's disease and related dementias research, see NIA's *Clinical Trials Finder* at [www.alzheimers.gov/clinical-trials](http://www.alzheimers.gov/clinical-trials).

## Summary

### Talking With Your Doctor About Clinical Trials

- **Talk with your doctor about participating in a clinical trial.**
- **Ask about the benefits and risks of participating in a trial.**
- **If you know of a trial you would like to be part of, bring trial information to your doctor to discuss.**





# Talking to Specialists and Hospital Medical Staff

If you have a health condition or illness, your doctor may send you to a specialist for further evaluation, or you may request to see a specialist yourself. Your insurance plan may require you to have a referral from your primary doctor before you visit a specialist. A visit to the specialist may be the same length of time as your primary doctor's appointment, or it could be different. The specialist may have seen your medical records or test results and be familiar with your case. If you are unclear about what the specialist tells you, ask questions.

For example, if the specialist says you have a medical condition that you aren't familiar with, you may want to say something like:

“ I don't know much about that condition. Could you explain what it is and how it might affect me? ” or

“ I've heard that is a painful problem. What can be done to prevent or manage the pain? ”

You also may ask for written materials to read, or you can call your primary doctor to clarify anything you haven't understood.

Ask the specialist to send information about any diagnosis or treatment to your primary doctor. This allows your primary doctor to keep track of your medical care. You also should let your primary doctor know at your next visit how well any treatments or medications the specialist recommended are working.



## Questions to Ask Your Specialist

- What is my diagnosis?
- What treatment do you recommend? How soon do I need to begin the new treatment?
- Are there any clinical trials available that I might participate in?
- Will you discuss my care with my primary doctor?

## If You Need Surgery

In some cases, surgery may be the best treatment for your condition. If so, your doctor will refer you to a surgeon. Knowing more about the operation will help you make an informed decision about how to proceed. It also will help you get ready for the surgery, which makes for a better recovery.

Ask the surgeon to explain what will be done during the operation and what reading material, videos, or websites you can look at before the operation.

Find out if you will have to stay overnight in the hospital or if the surgery can be done on an outpatient basis. Outpatient surgery may also be called same day surgery and usually does not require staying at the hospital for more than 24 hours. But you may need someone to drive you home. Minor surgeries that don't require an overnight stay can sometimes be done at medical centers called ambulatory surgical centers.



## Questions to Ask Your Surgeon

- What is the success rate of the operation? How many of these operations have you done successfully?
- What problems occur with this surgery? What kind of pain or discomfort can I expect?
- What kind of anesthesia will I have? Are there any risks associated with its use in older adults?
- Will I need to stay in the hospital overnight or longer?
- How long is recovery expected to take? What does it involve? When can I get back to my normal routine?



## Questions to Ask Medical Staff in the Hospital

- How long can I expect to be in the hospital?
- When will I see the doctor? Which doctors and health professionals will I see?
- What is the daily routine in this part of the hospital?
- Will I be given a copy of my hospitalization record, including test results, discharge orders, and medication prescriptions?

## If You Are Hospitalized

If you must go to the hospital, some extra guidelines may help you. First, most hospitals have a daily schedule for meals, doctors' rounds, visiting hours for family and friends, and additional therapies such as physical therapy or respiratory therapy. Knowing the hospital routine can make your stay more comfortable. Find out how much choice you have about your daily routine and express any preferences you have about your schedule. Doctors generally visit patients during specific times each day. Find out when doctors are likely to visit so you can have your questions ready.

In the hospital, various medical specialists, nurses, and other health professionals may examine you. If you are in a teaching hospital, doctors-in-training known as medical students, interns, residents, or fellows also may examine you. Many of these doctors-in-training already have a lot of knowledge and experience.

They may be able to take more time to talk with you than other staff. Nurses also can be an important source of information, especially because you will see them often.

## Seeking a Second Opinion

Getting a second opinion is a good health care practice. Any time you receive a diagnosis that may greatly impact your life, it's a good idea to seek another opinion. Hearing the views of two or more different doctors can help you decide what's best for you. In fact, your insurance plan may require it. Doctors are used to this approach, and most will not be insulted by your request for a second opinion. Your doctor may even be able to suggest other doctors who can review your case.

Always remember to check with your insurance provider in advance to find out if a second opinion is covered under your policy, if there are restrictions to which doctors you can see, and if you need a referral from your primary doctor.

# If You Have a Health Emergency

A visit to the emergency room is stressful. It may go more smoothly if you take along the following items:

- Your health insurance card or policy number
- A list of your medications
- A list of your medical problems
- A copy of your advance directive, living will, or designated power of attorney for health care
- The names and phone numbers of your doctor and one or two family members or close friends

Some people find it helpful to always keep this information on a card in their wallet or purse. Depending on the problem, you may have a long wait in the emergency room. Consider taking things to make the wait more comfortable, such as something to read and a sweater in case the room is cold.

While in the emergency room, ask questions if you don't understand tests or procedures that are being done. Before leaving, make sure you understand what the doctor told you or ask for written instructions. For example, if you have bandages that need changing, be sure you understand how and when this should be done.

Tell your primary doctor as soon as possible about your visit to the emergency room.



## Questions to Ask Medical Staff in the Emergency Room

- Will you talk to my primary doctor about my care?
- Do I need to arrange any further care?
- Can I get printed or written instructions for further care?
- Is there someone here who speaks my language and can explain the instructions?

## Summary

### Talking to Specialists and Hospital Medical Staff

- **Ask questions if you are unclear.**
- **Ask for printed instructions or write down as much information as possible.**
- **Tell your primary care doctor if you see a specialist, need surgery, or have gone to the emergency room.**



## Changing the Subject

# Difficult but Necessary Conversations

Much of the communication between a doctor and a patient is personal. To have a good partnership with your doctor, it is important to talk about difficult subjects like sex or memory problems, even if you are embarrassed or uncomfortable. Doctors are used to talking about personal matters and will try to ease your discomfort. Keep in mind that you're not alone — these topics concern many older people. It is important to understand that problems with memory, mood, sexual function, and urinary or bowel function are not a normal part of aging and may be treatable. A good doctor will take your concerns about these topics seriously and not brush them off. If you think your doctor isn't taking your concerns seriously, talk to him or her about your feelings or consider looking for a new doctor.

The following subjects are examples of difficult but necessary conversations to have with your doctor.

- Planning for care in the event of a serious illness
- Driving
- Falling and fear of falling
- Moving to assisted living or a skilled nursing facility
- Paying for medications
- Alcohol use
- Feeling unhappy with your doctor
- Grief, mourning, and depression

- Sexuality
- Incontinence
- Memory problems
- Problems with family

We will discuss each of these in this chapter and provide suggestions for ways to bring them up with your doctor.

## Planning for Care in the Event of a Serious Illness

You may have some concerns or wishes about your care if you become seriously ill. If you have questions about what choices you have, ask your doctor. You can specify your desires through documents called advance directives, such as a living will or health care proxy. One way to bring up the subject is to say:

“ I'm worried about what would happen in the hospital if I were very sick and not likely to get better. Can you tell me what generally happens in that case? ”

In general, the best time to talk with your doctor about these issues is while you are still relatively healthy. If you are admitted to the hospital or a nursing home, a nurse or other staff member may ask if you have any advance directives.



## Advance Directives

Advance directives are written instructions letting others know the type of care you want if you are seriously ill or dying. There are two main kinds:

- **Living will** — A living will is an official record of your end-of-life wishes for medical treatment in case you are no longer able to speak for yourself. Living wills typically refer only to life-prolonging treatment when you are in a life-threatening situation.
- **Health care proxy** — A health care proxy is also called a “durable power of attorney for health care.” Sometimes, this person may be referred to as a representative, surrogate, agent, or attorney-in-fact. A health care proxy is named to make care decisions for you if you are unable to do so yourself. This type of advance directive is also important if you want your health care proxy to be someone other than a legal member of your family.

Make sure your doctor and your family understand your advance directives and your views about end-of-life care. That will help them make the decisions you would want. Sometimes, people change their minds as they get older or after they become ill. Review the choices in your advance care directives regularly and make changes as needed.

Advance care directives are legally valid everywhere in the United States, but laws concerning them vary from state to state. Forms approved for the state where you live are available from many different health care organizations and institutions. Make sure the form you choose is legal in your home state and in any other state that you may live in for part of the year.

Discussing advance care planning decisions with your doctor is free through Medicare during your annual wellness visit. Private health insurance may also cover these discussions.

Give copies of your advance directive to your health care proxy and alternate proxy. Give your doctor a copy of the advanced directive for your medical records. Tell close family members and friends where you keep a copy. If you have to go to the hospital, give staff there a copy to include in your records.

NIA offers free resources with more information about advance directives and end-of-life considerations. Visit [www.nia.nih.gov/health/advance-care-planning-health-care-directives](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/advance-care-planning-health-care-directives) to learn more.



## Driving

Driving is an important part of everyday life for many people and making the decision to stop driving can be very difficult. Tell your doctor if you or people close to you are concerned about your driving and why. You might say,

“ I am finding it difficult to drive in glaring sunlight and at night. ” or

“ Other drivers keep honking at me when I am going the speed limit. ”

Your doctor can go over your medical conditions and medications to see if there are treatable problems that may be contributing to driving difficulties. Vision and memory tests are important. The doctor also may be able to suggest a driver's education refresher class designed for older drivers. You may decide it is safest for you to stop driving. In addition to public transportation, local Area Agencies on Aging offer affordable transportation for older adults. The Eldercare Locator is another resource for transportation for older adults (<https://eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Resources/LearnMoreAbout/Transportation.aspx>).



## Falling and Fear of Falling

A fall can be a serious event, often leading to injury and loss of independence, at least for a while. For this reason, many older adults develop a fear of falling. Studies show that fear of falling can keep people from going about their normal activities and, as a result, they may become frailer, which increases their risk of falling. If fear of falling is affecting your day-to-day life, let your doctor know. You might say,

“ I am not as strong as I once was, and my eyesight is not as sharp. I am worried about falling. ”

He or she may assess your risk for falling and be able to recommend some things to do to reduce your chance of falling. Exercises can help you improve your balance and strengthen your muscles — which can help prevent falls — at any age.



## Moving to Assisted Living or a Skilled Nursing Facility

Another hard decision that many older adults face is whether to age in place at home or move to a place that provides more help, often an assisted living facility or skilled nursing facility. If you are considering such a move, your doctor can help you weigh the pros and cons based on your health and other circumstances.

You might bring up the subject by asking,

“ How do you think health and safety would be affected if I remain home or if I move? ”

Your doctor may be able to refer you to a social worker or a local agency that can help arrange modifications to your home to make it safer or help find a new place to live that will best meet your needs, now and in the future.

## Paying for Medications

Don't hesitate to ask the doctor or pharmacist about the cost of your medications. If they are too expensive for you, ask if there are other options. Sometimes there is a generic or other less expensive choice. You could say, for instance:

“ It turns out that this medicine is too expensive for me. Is there another one or a generic drug that would cost less? ”

Your doctor or pharmacist may also be able to refer you to a medical assistance program that can help with drug costs.

## Medicare Prescription Drug Plans

Medicare prescription drug coverage is available to people with Medicare.

For information, call 800-633-4227 (800-MEDICARE) or visit [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov).

## Alcohol Use

Anyone at any age can have a drinking problem. Alcohol can have a greater effect as a person grows older because the aging process affects how the body handles alcohol. Someone whose drinking habits haven't changed may find over time that he or she has a problem. People can also develop a drinking problem later in life because of major life changes like the death of loved ones. In fact, depression in older adults often goes along with alcohol use disorder. Talk with your doctor if you think you may be developing a drinking problem. You could say:

“ Lately I've been wanting to have a drink earlier and earlier in the afternoon, and I find it's getting harder to stop after just one or two. What kind of treatments could help with this? ”

## Feeling Unhappy With Your Doctor

Misunderstandings can come up in any relationship, including between a patient and a doctor or the doctor's staff. If you feel uncomfortable with something your doctor or his or her staff has said or done, be direct. For example, if the doctor does not return your telephone calls, you may want to say something like this:

“ I realize that you care for a lot of patients and are very busy, but I feel frustrated when I have to wait for days for you to return my call. Is there a way we can work together to improve this? ”

Being honest is much better for your health than avoiding the doctor. If you have a long-standing relationship with your doctor, working out the problem may be more useful than looking for a new doctor.

## Grief, Mourning, and Depression

As people grow older, they may lose significant people in their lives, including spouses and cherished friends. Or, they may have to move away from home or give up favorite activities.

A doctor who knows about your losses is better able to understand how you are feeling and can make suggestions that may help you.

Although it is normal to mourn when you have a loss, later life does not have to be a time of ongoing sadness. If you feel sad all the time or for more than a few weeks, let your doctor know. Also, tell your doctor about symptoms such as lack of energy, poor appetite, trouble sleeping, or little interest in life. These could be signs of depression, which is a medical condition. Depression may be common, especially when people experience losses, but it is also treatable. It is NOT a normal part of aging. Let your doctor know about your feelings and ask about treatment. You may want to say,

“ I haven't been feeling like myself lately. I think I might be depressed. ”

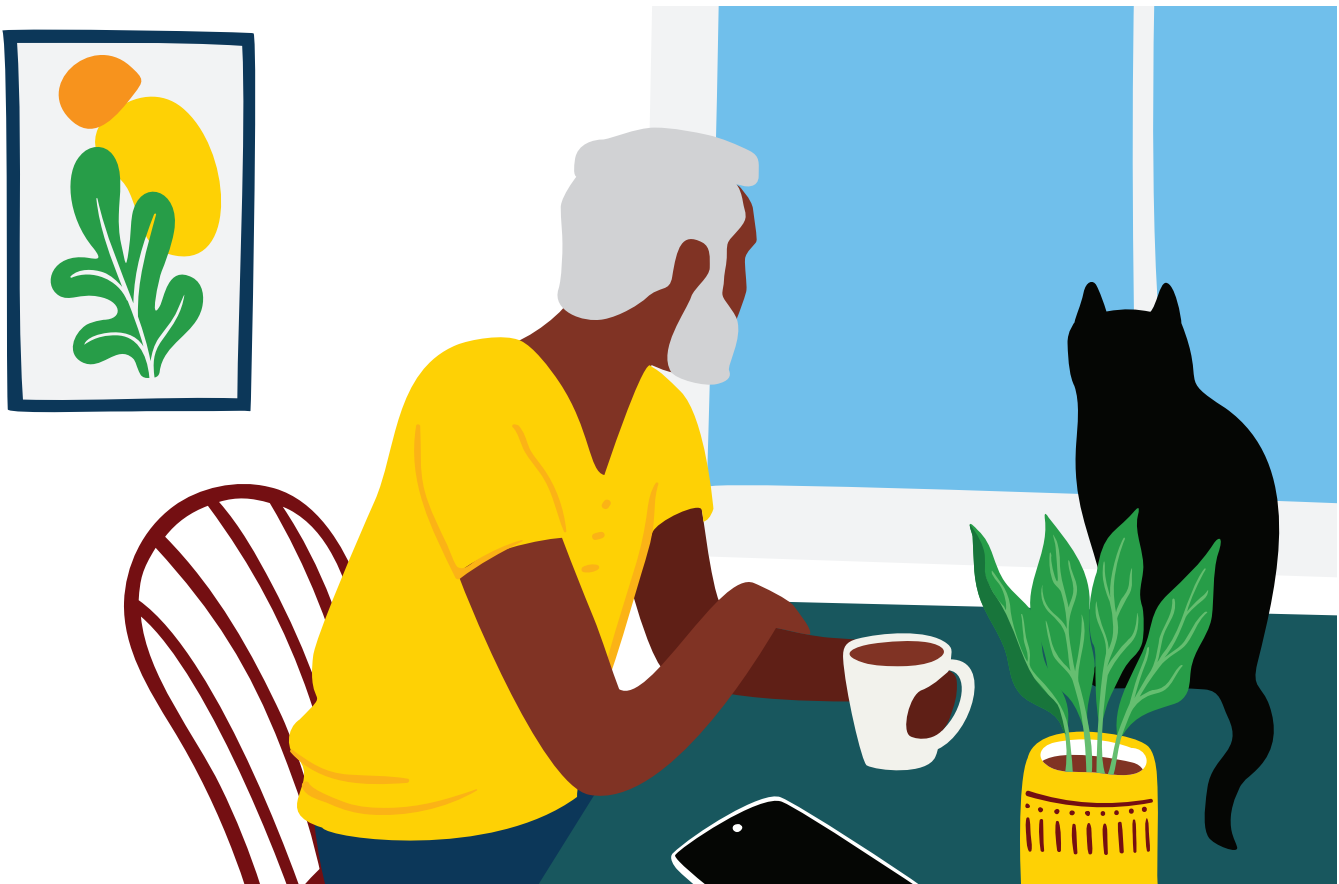
## Sexuality

Most health professionals now understand that sexuality remains important in later life. If you are not satisfied with your sex life, don't just assume it's because of your age. In addition to talking about age-related changes, you can ask your doctor about the effects of an illness or a disability on sexual function. Also, ask your doctor about the influence medications or surgery may have on your sex life.

If you aren't sure how to bring up the topic, try saying:

“ I have a personal question I would like to ask you... ” or





“ I understand that this condition or medication can affect my body in many ways. Will it affect my sex life at all? ”

## STIs/STDs

It's important to practice safe sex, no matter your age. After divorce, separation, or the death of a spouse, some older adults may find themselves dating again and possibly having sex with a new partner. It's a good idea to talk with your doctor about how safe sex can reduce your risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Your risk of contracting an STI/STD does not go down with age. Contracting an STI/STD is a possibility at any point in your life during which you are sexually active. In addition to the risk of being infected with HIV/AIDS, unprotected sex increases your risk of contracting chlamydia, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhea,

pubic lice, syphilis, and other STIs/STDs. STD testing is not usually included in a regular medical exam so you will need to ask your doctor about testing. You may want to say something like:

“ I've never been tested for STDs. Do I need to be? ”

## Incontinence

Older adults sometimes have problems controlling their bladder or bowels. This is called urinary or fecal incontinence and it can often be treated. Depending on the type of incontinence you have, the doctor may recommend exercises, helpful ways to change your habits, prescribe useful medications, or advise surgery.

If you have trouble controlling your bladder or bowels, it is important to let the doctor know.

To bring up the topic, you could say something like:

“ Since my last visit, there have been several times when I couldn’t control my bladder. ”

## Memory Problems

Older adults often worry about their ability to think and remember. For most older adults, thinking and memory remain relatively intact in later years. However, if you or your family notice that you have problems remembering recent events or thinking clearly, let your doctor know. Be specific about the changes you’ve noticed. For example, you could say:

“ I’ve always been able to balance my checkbook without any problems, but lately I’m very confused. ”

Your doctor will probably want you to have a thorough check-up to see what might be causing your symptoms.

In some cases, memory problems are caused by conditions such as high blood pressure,

## Free Information

If you are worried about memory problems or dementia, you can contact NIA’s Alzheimer’s and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center. ADEAR staff can:

- Answer specific questions about Alzheimer’s and related dementias.
- Send free publications.
- Refer callers to local resources.
- Provide information about clinical trials.
- Help you find materials about specific issues.

Call toll-free 800-438-4380 or visit the ADEAR website at [www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers](http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers).

depression, or infection. Sometimes memory problems may be a side effect of medication. But other times, the problem is a type of dementia, such as Alzheimer’s disease. With a careful family history, physical exam, medical tests, and tests of memory and problem-solving, specialists can diagnose probable or possible Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia.



Determining the cause of memory problems is important to help the doctor, patient, and family choose the best plan of care.

Although there is no cure for Alzheimer's or related conditions such as vascular dementia, frontotemporal dementia, or Lewy body dementia, medicines may help for a while, especially in the early stages of the disease. Treatments (including medicines and non-medicine changes like getting enough exercise, eating a healthy diet, and getting seven to eight hours of sleep per night) can also ease serious behavioral symptoms such as agitation, anxiety, and depression. Support groups and education are important and can help patients and caregivers.

## Problems With Family

Even strong and supportive families can have problems, especially under the stress of illness. Although family problems can be awkward to discuss, talking about them can help your doctor help you. Your doctor may be able to suggest steps to improve the situation for you and your family.

Some people find it easier to put their thoughts into writing. Confidential messages can be sent through the patient portal. You may want to say,

“ Sometimes when we are stressed and tired, my family and I get into arguments and start yelling at each other. This makes me uncomfortable. What can I do? ”

Your doctor may be able to provide resources or referrals to other services that can help you and your family.

## Elder Abuse

Mistreatment of older adults can take the form of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect or abandonment, psychological abuse, and financial exploitation. Mistreatment can be by family members, strangers, health care

providers, caregivers, or friends, and it could happen anywhere, including at home, a family member's house, an assisted living facility, or a nursing home.

Some types of mistreatment may not just be medical but criminal. If you feel that someone you know is being mistreated, you can seek help for them through Adult Protective Services, government agencies that focus on aging, and community-level organizations that provide services to older adults.

Having these difficult but necessary conversations is key to your good health. You might find that using booklets from NIA or other organizations can help you feel more comfortable bringing up difficult subjects when talking with your doctor. See the section called For More Information on the next page to find such booklets.

## Summary

### Difficult but Necessary Conversations

- **Don't hesitate to discuss difficult subjects even if they don't seem directly related to a medical condition.**
- **You and your doctor can make better decisions together if the doctor knows about all your concerns, including non-medical issues.**
- **If the doctor can't help solve your non-medical problems, he or she may be able to refer you to other resources that can help.**
- **Use brochures or booklets as props to introduce topics you may feel awkward discussing.**
- **If you feel the doctor doesn't take your concerns seriously, it might be time to think about changing doctors.**

## Additional Resources

# For More Information

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You can make the most of your time with your doctor by being informed. This often includes consulting other sources of health information including federal agencies such as NIH; online resources; books and articles available at libraries, national organizations, or associations; and self-help groups.

NIA, which is part of the NIH, has free information in English and Spanish. Call the NIA Information Center at 800-222-2225 or TTY at 800-222-4225 or visit <https://order.nia.nih.gov> to order publications. Spanish-language publications are also available. You can also sign up for NIA's email alerts at the NIA website: [www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov).

For free fact sheets and other publications about Alzheimer's disease, contact NIA's Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center toll-free at 800-438-4380, or visit [www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers).

Good health care depends on good communication with your doctor and other health care professionals. Let the ideas in this booklet help you take a more active role in your health care. The following organizations have other resources that may be useful.



## General Resources

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### National Institute on Aging Information Center

800-222-2225 (toll-free)  
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)  
[niaic@nia.nih.gov](mailto:niaic@nia.nih.gov)  
<https://order.nia.nih.gov>  
[www.nia.nih.gov/health](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health)

### Administration on Aging Administration for Community Living

202-401-4634  
[aclinfo@acl.hhs.gov](mailto:aclinfo@acl.hhs.gov)  
[www.acl.gov](http://www.acl.gov)

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

800-232-4636 (800-CDC-INFO;  
toll-free)  
888-232-6348 (TTY/toll-free)  
[cdcinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:cdcinfo@cdc.gov)  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

### Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

800-633-4227  
(800-MEDICARE; toll-free)  
877-486-2048 (TTY/toll-free)  
[www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov)

### National Institutes of Health

301-496-4000  
301-402-9612 (TTY)  
[nihinfo@od.nih.gov](mailto:nihinfo@od.nih.gov)  
[www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov)

### National Library of Medicine MedlinePlus

[www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov)

Search for:

“Advance Directives”

“Caregivers”

“End of Life Issues”

“Exercise”

“Memory”

“Motor Vehicle Safety”

## Advance Directives

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### American Geriatrics Society Health in Aging Foundation

800-563-4916 (toll-free)  
[info@healthinaging.org](mailto:info@healthinaging.org)  
[www.healthinaging.org/  
making-your-wishes-known](http://www.healthinaging.org/making-your-wishes-known)

### National POLST (Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment) Paradigm

202-780-8352  
[info@polst.org](mailto:info@polst.org)  
[www.polst.org](http://www.polst.org)

## Alcohol

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### National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

888-696-4222  
(888-MY-NIAAAA; toll-free)  
[niaaaweb-r@exchange.nih.gov](mailto:niaaaweb-r@exchange.nih.gov)  
[www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)

### Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

877-726-4727 (toll-free)  
800-662-4357 (national  
helpline; toll-free)  
800-487-4889 (TTY/toll-free)  
[samhsainfo@samhsa.hhs.gov](mailto:samhsainfo@samhsa.hhs.gov)  
<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

## Assisted Living

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### Housing Choices

#### AARP

888-687-2277  
(888-OUR-AARP; toll-free)  
877-434-7598 (TTY/toll-free)  
877-253-5908 (Español/línea  
gratis)  
[member@aarp.org](mailto:member@aarp.org)  
[www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)

### American Health Care Association

800-321-0343 (toll-free)  
[www.careconversations.org](http://www.careconversations.org)

### Nursing Home Compare Medicare

[www.medicare.gov/  
nursinghomecompare](http://www.medicare.gov/nursinghomecompare)

## Clinical Research

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### Alzheimers.gov

[www.alzheimers.gov](http://www.alzheimers.gov)

### ClinicalTrials.gov

<https://clinicaltrials.gov>

### NIA Clinical Trials Information and Resources

[www.nia.nih.gov/health/  
clinical-trials](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/clinical-trials)

### Registries and Matching Services for Clinical Trials

[www.nia.nih.gov/health/  
registries-and-matching-  
services-clinical-trials](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/registries-and-matching-services-clinical-trials)

### Brain Donation: a Gift for Future Generations

[www.nia.nih.gov/health/  
brain-donation-gift-future-  
generations](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/brain-donation-gift-future-generations)

## Driving and Transportation

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### AARP Driver Safety Program

888-687-2277  
(888-OUR-AARP; toll-free)  
877-434-7598 (TTY/toll-free)  
877-253-5908 (Español/línea  
gratis)  
[member@aarp.org](mailto:member@aarp.org)  
[www.aarp.org/families/  
driver\\_safety](http://www.aarp.org/families/driver_safety)

**National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**  
888-327-4236 (toll-free)  
800-424-9153 (TTY/toll-free)  
[ncsaweb@dot.gov](mailto:ncsaweb@dot.gov)  
[www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/older-drivers](http://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/older-drivers)

## End-of-Life Care

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**National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization**  
800-658-8898 (toll-free)  
[caringinfo@nhpco.org](mailto:caringinfo@nhpco.org)  
[www.caringinfo.org](http://www.caringinfo.org)

## Exercise

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**American College of Sports Medicine**  
317-637-9200  
[publicinfo@acsm.org](mailto:publicinfo@acsm.org)  
[www.acsm.org](http://www.acsm.org)

**National Institute on Aging**  
800-222-2225 (toll-free)  
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)  
[niaic@nia.nih.gov](mailto:niaic@nia.nih.gov)  
[www.nia.nih.gov/health/exercise-physical-activity](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/exercise-physical-activity)

**President's Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition**  
240-276-9567  
[fitness@hhs.gov](mailto:fitness@hhs.gov)  
[www.fitness.gov](http://www.fitness.gov)

## Grief, Mourning, and Depression

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**National Library of Medicine MedlinePlus: Bereavement**  
[www.medlineplus.gov/bereavement.html](http://www.medlineplus.gov/bereavement.html)

## Help With Family and Caregiving

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**Eldercare Locator**  
800-677-1116 (toll-free; bilingual)  
<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

**Family Caregiver Alliance**  
800-445-8106 (toll-free)  
[info@caregiver.org](mailto:info@caregiver.org)  
[www.caregiver.org](http://www.caregiver.org)

**National Alliance for Caregiving**  
301-718-8444  
[www.caregiving.org](http://www.caregiving.org)

**National Center on Elder Abuse**  
U.S. Administration on Aging  
855-500-3537  
(855-500-ELDR; toll-free)  
[ncea-info@aoa.hhs.gov](mailto:ncea-info@aoa.hhs.gov)  
<https://ncea.acl.gov>

**U.S. Department of Justice**  
202-514-2000  
800-877-8339 (TTY/toll-free)  
[elder.justice@usdoj.gov](mailto:elder.justice@usdoj.gov)  
[www.justice.gov/elderjustice/find-support-elder-abuse](http://www.justice.gov/elderjustice/find-support-elder-abuse)

## HIV/AIDS

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**HIV.gov**  
[www.hiv.gov](http://www.hiv.gov)

## Incontinence

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**National Association for Continence**  
800-252-3337  
(800-BLADDER; toll-free)  
[memberservices@nafc.org](mailto:memberservices@nafc.org)  
[www.nafc.org](http://www.nafc.org)

**Simon Foundation for Continence**  
800-237-4666  
(800-23-SIMON; toll-free)  
[info@simonfoundation.org](mailto:info@simonfoundation.org)  
[www.simonfoundation.org](http://www.simonfoundation.org)

## Medication

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**Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services**  
800-633-4227  
(800-MEDICARE; toll-free)  
877-486-2048 (TTY/toll-free)  
[www.medicare.gov/part-d](http://www.medicare.gov/part-d)

**U.S. Food and Drug Administration**  
888-463-6332  
(888-INFO-FDA; toll-free)  
[druginfo@fda.hhs.gov](mailto:druginfo@fda.hhs.gov)  
[www.fda.gov/ForConsumers](http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers)

## Memory Problems

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**Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center**  
National Institute on Aging  
800-438-4380 (toll-free)  
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)  
[adear@nia.nih.gov](mailto:adear@nia.nih.gov)  
[www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers)

**Alzheimers.gov**  
[www.alzheimers.gov](http://www.alzheimers.gov)

**Alzheimer's Association**  
800-272-3900 (toll-free; 24/7)  
866-403-3073  
(TTY/toll-free; 24/7)  
[info@alz.org](mailto:info@alz.org)  
[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

## Sexuality

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**Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Elders**  
888-234-7243 (888-234-SAGE; toll-free)  
[info@sageusa.org](mailto:info@sageusa.org)  
[www.sageusa.org](http://www.sageusa.org)

For Your Convenience

# Worksheets







## Worksheet 1

# Family Health History

At your first visit and perhaps subsequent visits, your doctor will likely ask you about your family's health history. A family medical history can identify people with a higher-than-usual chance of having common disorders, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, certain cancers, and diabetes. These disorders are caused by a combination of genetic factors, environmental conditions, and lifestyle choices. A complete family medical history should include information about your grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, parents, sisters, and brothers. This form can help you organize your thoughts about conditions and illnesses that have affected your family members. You can download more copies of this form at [www.nia.nih.gov/health/twyd-worksheets](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/twyd-worksheets).

Family Medical History	
Family Member	Disease or Condition



# Questions to Ask Your Doctor

When choosing a new doctor, answers to the following questions can help you decide. You can download more copies of this form at [www.nia.nih.gov/health/twyd-worksheets](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/twyd-worksheets).

## What Do You Need to Know About a Doctor?

### BASICS

Question	Answer
Will language be an obstacle to communication? Is there someone in the office who speaks my language?	
Do I prefer a group practice or an individual doctor?	
Does it matter which hospital the doctor admits patients to?	
Does it matter whether the doctor supports clinical research?	

### LOGISTICS

Question	Answer
Is the location of the doctor's office important?	
Is there parking? What does it cost?	
Is the office on a bus or subway line?	
Does the building have an elevator? What about ramps for a wheelchair or walker?	

## OFFICE POLICIES

Question	Answer
<b>What days/hours does the doctor see patients?</b>	
<b>Are there times set aside for the doctor to take phone calls?</b>	
<b>Does the doctor accept emailed questions? Is there a charge for this service?</b>	
<b>Does the doctor ever make house calls?</b>	
<b>How far in advance do I have to make appointments?</b>	
<b>What's the process for urgent care?</b>	
<b>How do I reach the doctor in an emergency?</b>	
<b>Who takes care of patients after hours or when the doctor is away?</b>	
<b>How do I access my medical records to keep track of diagnoses, test results, treatment plans, and medications?</b>	

## Worksheet 3

# Changes to Discuss

Tell your doctor about any changes in your life since your last appointment. The list below can help you think of what to mention. Of course, all the things on this list won't apply at every visit! Tear out this form and make a copy of the blank list so you will always have a clean copy to use. Or you can download additional copies of the form at [www.nia.nih.gov/health/twyd-worksheets](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/twyd-worksheets). Then, take a minute to think about each of these possible topics. Jot down when you first noticed each change. Use the last column to note any additional information that may be helpful for the doctor to know.

Your Physical Health		
Topic	Date	Notes
Recent hospitalizations or emergencies		
Bone/Joint pain or stiffness		
Bowel/Bladder problems		
Chest pain/Shortness of breath		
Headaches/Feeling dizzy or lightheaded		
Vision/Hearing changes		
Skin changes		
Your Medications, Mental Health, and Lifestyle		
Alcohol use		
Weight changes		

<b>Diet/Appetite changes</b>		
<b>Medications</b>		
<b>Tobacco use</b>		
<b>Your Thoughts and Feelings</b>		
<b>Feeling lonely or isolated</b>		
<b>Feeling sad, down, or blue</b>		
<b>Problems with memory or thinking</b>		
<b>Problems with sleep or changes in sleep patterns</b>		
<b>Everyday Living</b>		
<b>Accidents, injuries, or falls</b>		
<b>Daily activities</b>		
<b>Exercise</b>		
<b>Problems with intimacy or sexual activity</b>		
<b>Driving/Transportation/ Mobility</b>		
<b>Advance directives</b>		
<b>Living situation</b>		

# Worksheet 4

# Concerns

At each visit, your doctor will likely ask about your concerns. It's a good idea to think about what you'd like to talk about before the actual visit. This form can help you organize your thoughts.

Tear out this form and make a copy of the blank form so you will always have a clean copy to use. Or download additional copies from NIA's website at [www.nia.nih.gov/health/twyd-worksheets](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/twyd-worksheets). Then, after you make an appointment, take a minute to write down the name of the doctor and the appointment details (for example, the date, time, and address). Use the form to make a list (in order, from most important to least important) of the concerns you want to discuss.

<b>Doctor:</b>	<b>Appt. Date:</b>
<b>Time:</b>	
<b>Address:</b>	<b>Phone:</b>
<b>Appointment Details (Most Important to Least Important)</b>	
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
<b>Notes:</b>	





# Worksheet 5

# Medications

You may be taking many different medicines as well as numerous vitamins and over-the-counter drugs. It can be confusing to keep track of everything! This form can help. Because your medication regimen may change over time, tear out this form and make a copy of the blank form so you will always have a clean copy to use. Or you can download additional copies from NIA’s website at [www.nia.nih.gov/health/twyd-worksheets](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/twyd-worksheets). Try to bring a completed and updated copy of this form to every doctor appointment.

Name of Medication	What It's For	Date Started	Doctor	Color/ Shape	Dose	When and How Often



Any Suggestions?

# Closing Thoughts

If you have suggestions to add to future editions of this publication or other ideas to make it more helpful, please contact the National Institute on Aging:

800-222-2225 (toll-free)

800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

[niaic@nia.nih.gov](mailto:niaic@nia.nih.gov)

[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)



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