

The Value of Assertiveness When Talking to Your Doctor

“Assertiveness” is the ability to express your desires, questions and needs in a clear and direct way. This can help your health care team know what you want and need to know. This fact sheet covers:

- Why being assertive can help you.
- Tips on being assertive.
- How to register a complaint.
- The value of a second opinion.



Why Assertiveness Helps

Sometimes, doctors may assume they know what you want or need. They may also assume that you understand complicated terms or treatment options. If you are assertive, you can make sure you are clear about what information you are missing and what you want done.



Ways to be Assertive

Use “I” statements when speaking with your doctor. For example: “I feel anxious when I don’t have enough information about next steps and potential side effects.”

Avoid attacking or blaming the health care professional. Avoid statements like these: “You never answer my questions.” “You always rush me.” Instead, say: “How will the medicine or treatment help me?” or “I feel disrespected when I cannot get my questions answered.”

Ask for a translator if needed. If you cannot communicate with your doctor in your preferred language, working with a certified translator can help. Hospitals often have these available or can arrange for one.

Let the doctor know if you feel rushed, confused, intimidated or dissatisfied. The only way a doctor can help you is if they know what you are thinking—express your thoughts and feelings.

Let the doctor know if you need them to speak slower, louder or more clearly. Don’t be embarrassed to say, “I can’t hear you, please speak louder.” Being open and direct with your doctor and treatment team helps everyone involved.

Be honest and detailed. Instead of just saying “Oh, fine” or “Not so good” when a doctor asks how you are, let them know exactly how your illness is affecting you physically and emotionally.

You deserve to be comfortable. Tell your doctor about your pain, fatigue or other symptoms of discomfort, even if the doctor does not ask you directly. Remember, their job is to take care of you.



What to Do If You Have a Complaint

There may be times you become disappointed, dissatisfied or angry. If these feelings affect your trust in your doctor, you may want to register a complaint.

Here are some helpful hints about what to do if you or a loved one wants to complain about the care you received:

- Remember that you have a right to be heard.
- Speak to the person you are upset with. Arrange a time that is convenient for both of you.
- Try not to raise your voice or show anger. This often does not help and only makes them defensive.
- Allow the person to respond.
- Discuss the situation with a social worker. They may have some suggestions on how to handle this kind of difficulty.
- Often, hospitals have patient representatives whose responsibility is to resolve these types of conflicts and help improve communication.
- You can also speak to the nursing supervisor, the primary doctor on your team or a hospital administrator. Explain your situation and ask them for assistance.



A Second Opinion

A review of your diagnosis and treatment options by another doctor is called a “second opinion.” This is often done to make sure you are getting the best advice. It is your right as a patient and gives you confidence in the medical care you are receiving. Doctors often are very open to a second opinion. They may even suggest a second doctor to provide one.

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