

Being a Smart Patient

“A smart patient is a person with a medical problem who can work successfully with the doctor to get needs met.”

Smart patients:

- Are clear about their needs and communicate effectively
- Develop an active partnership with their doctors
- Understand the realities of the medical system and work with them
- Understand the realities of their own life and work with them
- Accept responsibility for lifestyle decisions and their consequences
- Take an active role in their treatment

To have an effective partnership with your doctor you need to fulfill your part of the relationship. To give the best advice your doctor needs the best information. Though X-rays and blood tests can be important, your description of what is happening in your body may provide the best clues.

The questions about symptoms of a new problem include:

Where, when, what does it feel like? What makes it better? Worse? Is there a pattern? When did you have this before? What have you done about it? What do you think is causing this? How did you come to this conclusion?...and what makes you think this is true? How much does this interfere with your life?

If a chronic or an old problem: What has changed? Is anything better? Worse? When did you have this before? What have you done about it? How much does this interfere with your life?

In general symptoms that do not persist more than 2 weeks or that have an obvious reason other than cancer (i.e., injury) do not indicate cancer-related problems. A severe problem that interferes with your life deserves attention regardless of cause. Because a history of cancer automatically puts a psychological “frame” around symptoms there may be a learning curve before you can distinguish a minor from a more important problem. Asking the questions listed above can help this process.

Tips for working with the medical system

- List your problems and any information you have before your visit.
- Prioritize your issues so you discuss the most important ones first.
- If you have questions that don't require a visit, fax or email them to the doctor ahead of time.
- Keep your own copies of lab and x-ray reports, especially if you have several doctors.
- Always keep a current list of medicines with you.
- *Be nice to the staff, they're the ones that actually run the office!*