

HOW TO BRING OUT THE BEST IN YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM



8 EASY TIPS

**It's your health.
You call the shots.**



NATIONAL HEALTH COUNCIL

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YOUR TEAM NEEDS A CAPTAIN.

AND IT'S YOU.



When you're a patient with a chronic condition, there are certain things you can do to get the best care from your health care providers. The number one point to remember is that you are the captain of your health care team. Your doctors, nurses, and therapists all work for you. Of course, you need to cooperate with treatments they prescribe. But they can do their best for you when you step up and become an active player on your team.

Here are eight easy ways to take charge of your team.

1. Want answers? Ask questions.

Ask your doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and other health care providers. Don't be shy.

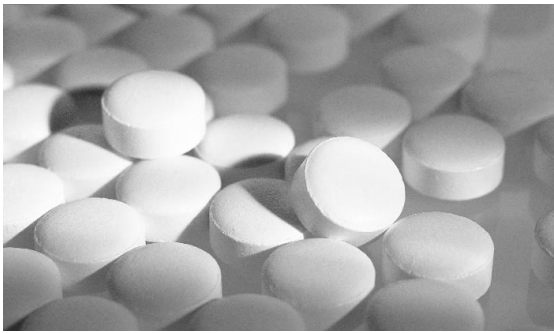
When it's your health, there's no such thing as a dumb question.

Plan your questions in advance. When you think of one, write it down. In fact, start a special notebook to keep a record of your symptoms, side effects, what you eat, all the medicines you take, and most important, your questions. Plan to ask questions about what to expect. Don't be afraid to ask "why?"

Bring your notebook to your appointments so you won't forget anything. Then, write down the answers the doctor or other people give you. If you don't have time to write it all down during the appointment, make your notes immediately afterward while the information is still fresh in your mind. There's a lot to keep track of, so keep a written record of everything.

If you don't understand the answers, say so. It's true that doctors are busy and often in a hurry, but it's part of their job to listen to you and give you the information you need. Keep in mind your doctor wants you to understand so that you can do your part.

So ask until you understand.



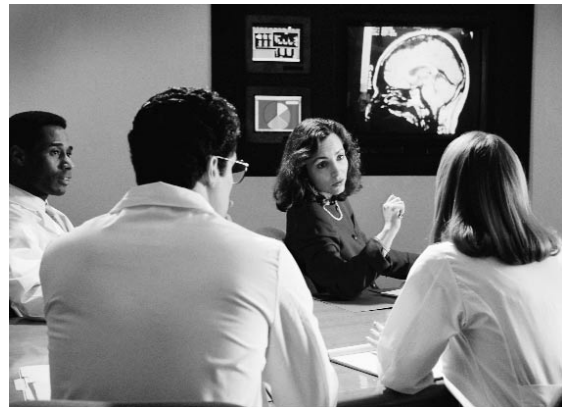
2. Tell your doctor everything.

In a doctor's office, it's tempting to say what you think the doctor wants to hear, or to say you're doing better than you really are. This is the time to provide complete information about everything you are feeling and thinking. Talk about what is changing, what is better, and what is worse. Speak up about the amount of pain you are in. Tell the doctor about other conditions you may have, and about *all* the medicines you are taking. If you think a medicine he or she prescribed may be causing a problem, mention it. There may be a different medicine you can try.

Also, be totally honest about your health habits. If you miss taking your medicine, say so. Tell exactly how much and how often you smoke, drink and exercise, and about what you eat. Tell the doctor if you have been feeling depressed or anxious. Your doctor can only give you the best treatment—treatment developed especially for you—if he or she has complete and correct information about you.

3. Keep your team connected.

Tell each health care provider about other health care providers you are seeing. Whether you're receiving acupuncture, physical therapy, chiropractic or another treatment, each player on the team needs to know the big picture to provide the best care for you. Let them all know if you are taking herbal supplements or vitamins, or if you are on a special diet. You are the only person who knows everything that is going on with you, so it's your job to keep everyone on the team informed.



4. Network with others.

Whatever your condition or illness, you can bet there's a national, non-profit health organization out there to help people like you. Agencies like the American Cancer Society and the American Diabetes Association. These organizations can offer support and helpful advice—from people who know exactly what you're going through. They can educate you about the latest news and research on your condition. They have toll-free phone numbers, Web sites, newsletters, and sometimes even local

newsletters, and sometimes even local support groups that can help you. Ask your providers about an organization for you, or visit www.NationalHealthCouncil.org for a list of organizations.

5. Educate yourself.

An informed patient will get better health care. The more you know about your condition, the different tests and treatments that are used, and the symptoms and how they will change over time, the more you can be an active part of your health care team. You can go to the library and ask the librarian for help, or you can go to the Internet. If you don't have a computer with Internet access, visit one of the many community centers or libraries that do, or ask a family member to do a search for you. Keep in mind that some Web sites are more trustworthy than others, so be sure the information you receive is based on solid science.

6. Take someone with you.

Sometimes it's hard to keep track of all the advice you get, and sometimes there's a lot you need to do to follow up. Bring a family member or friend along on your appointments or to the hospital. It can make you feel more comfortable and more confident, and help you have a better conversation with your doctor or other health care provider. And your family member or friend, who knows what your day-to-day life is like, can help you follow through with your doctor's advice and manage your care once you leave the office or the hospital.

7. Second opinions make sense.

It's standard practice in medicine. When you get a serious diagnosis or are told you need a test or treatment—especially surgery—it's a good idea to get a second opinion from another doctor. Many insurance plans cover a second opinion, and some even require it. Your current doctor should understand this, and shouldn't be offended when you say you want another point-of-view. Here's how to do it:

- ***If you are told you need surgery***, or a complex test or other treatment, tell your doctor or the office staff that you must first check with your health insurance plan.
- ***Call your health insurance plan*** to determine if the procedure itself will be approved, and if a second opinion is covered. If so, ask the health plan representative for a list of other providers the plan will cover. Be sure to write down the name of the person you spoke to, the date, and the details of the conversation in your health care notebook.
- ***To find other health care providers***, ask friends and relatives if they know of doctors who treat your condition, call a local doctor referral service, or contact your state medical society (which can be found in the white pages of the phone book). Also, a non-profit agency for your condition such as the American Heart Association or the Arthritis Foundation may be able to help you find doctors in your area.

- **When you call to make the appointment with the second doctor,** tell the office staff exactly why you are calling—for a second opinion. Depending on your condition, sometimes they will ask you to bring certain medical records, which you will need to get from your current doctor's office staff. Don't be shy about this—the records are about you, and you have a right to use them.

- **Once you have a second opinion,** compare what is similar and what is different. You may want to contact a non-profit agency that specializes in information about your condition, or visit their Web site to help make a decision on what to do next. Even if you stay with the first doctor, you'll feel much better about the decision.



8. Take charge of your team.

Keep in mind that your health care team is there to help you. That means you need to let everyone on the team know what is working

for you and what is not. Talk to each one of them openly.

If you are not comfortable with someone and feel that you can't talk to him or her about your health care needs, or you are not getting the care and attention you need, you are better off making a change—no matter how difficult it may seem.



It's your health. You call the shots.

If you have a chronic condition that requires you to see doctors and other health care providers often, you have a special need to manage your health care team. You must take the responsibility to follow treatments you and your providers have worked out together. So step up. Ask questions. Educate yourself. Tell your doctor everything, and keep everyone on your team connected. Network with others. You'll get better care and feel better about it, too.

To make sure you're getting all the benefits your health insurance plan offers, get a copy of our brochure, "Making Your Health Plan Work for You." Visit our Web site at www.NationalHealthCouncil.org or write to us at our Washington, DC address.