

Talking with Your Aging Family Member's Physician

Overview

Communicating with and getting to know your aging family member's physician.

- Establish a relationship
- Meeting with the doctor
- Encourage greater participation
- In case of hospitalization

It isn't always easy to know when an older family member's health problems are within the normal range or when they're cause for serious concern. What should you do if an older family member is skipping meals or having difficulty sleeping? Do you assume he or she will call the doctor? Should you get involved? Below are some suggestions.

Establish a relationship

The best way to stay informed about your family member's health is to establish a relationship with his or her doctor. By establishing a three-way partnership -- you, your family member, and the doctor -- you'll gain a better understanding of your family member's health concerns and treatment plan. Most doctors who treat older adults are eager to work with family members, recognizing that the family often shares responsibility for seeing that instructions are carried out. Here are some suggestions:

- *Before you contact your family member's doctor, check first to make sure that your relative is comfortable with the idea.* Let him know why you are concerned and the information you are seeking.
- *If you take your family member to doctor's appointments, use this as an opportunity to talk with the doctor.* If not, it may be helpful to schedule a separate appointment with the doctor to discuss issues and concerns about your relative's health. If you live out of town, you can schedule a time to talk over the phone.
- *Before the appointment, write down questions and topics that need to be addressed.*
- *Let the doctor know you are involved with your family member's care and want to be contacted whenever changes occur.* Explain the role other family members play in helping with care, too.
- *Let the doctor know when and how you and other involved family members can be reached.* Request the same information from the doctor.
- *Tell the doctor about any gradual or sudden changes in your aging family member's behavior or physical or mental health.*
- *Keep a file that includes all of the important medical information about your family member.* The file should include names and phone numbers of other doctors, names of medications and side effects, and a brief medical history. This file can assist health care professionals in the event of an emergency. Update the file as changes occur, so the information is current and accurate.

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Meeting with the doctor

It's important to prepare ahead of time before meeting in person or on the phone with your family member's doctor.

- *Assign one person in the family to be in charge of health issues for your older relative.* Doctors prefer to communicate with one family member rather than several people who may be calling and asking questions.
- *Before the meeting or appointment, write down any questions or issues you have.*
- *Try to be as open and honest as possible with the doctor.* And don't be afraid to ask questions.
- *Don't assume the doctor knows your aging family member's background.* Your family member may not always tell the doctor the whole story. Provide as much information as you have about your family member's medical history, day-to-day health, medications, and other pertinent information, such as family problems, a recent move, or significant losses.
- *Write down the doctor's instructions as he speaks.* This is one way to avoid mistakes in carrying out the doctor's orders. Anyone can become confused, so it's best to have instructions in writing. If the doctor agrees, you might also record his instructions for playback later.
- *Let the doctor know if your family member isn't following his instructions.* This way the doctor can go over instructions again with her, and emphasize the importance of sticking to his prescribed treatment plan. Or, the doctor may need to come up with an alternative plan.
- *Ask the doctor to explain any information you do not understand.* Medical language can be hard to understand, so don't be shy about asking the doctor to repeat information. That includes asking for a detailed explanation of all medications and the side effects.
- *Point out any problems or side effects from medications* that your older family member may be experiencing.
- *Keep the doctor informed.* If you notice gradual or sudden changes in your aging family member's behavior or physical or mental health, alert the doctor.
- *Call the doctor immediately if you have serious concerns* about your family member's health, well-being, or side effects from medications.
- *Let the doctor know if you are not satisfied with the care your family member is receiving.* For example, you may feel his symptoms are not being taken seriously. Or perhaps he has tried three different medications with no relief. These are legitimate concerns that should be addressed with the doctor. If the doctor says, "Nothing more can be done," that may mean, "There's nothing more I can do." It may be time to change doctors or consult another health care provider.

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- *Stand firm on your family member receiving a thorough evaluation and treatment for medical problems that are concerning either of you.*

Encourage greater participation

Encourage your aging family member to share questions and concerns with the doctor. The more she participates, the better.

- *Encourage the doctor to make eye contact with your family member.* If the doctor is directing most of his eye contact at you, look over to your family member regularly. This will signal to the doctor that you want him to establish eye contact with your family member, too.
- *If your aging family member has dementia or is unable to communicate with the doctor, "translate" what is happening for her.* Explain what the doctor is saying. Repeat medical instructions. Assure her that the doctor is there to help.
- *Encourage your family member to tell the doctor about any symptoms or health worries.* It's possible that some of her fears are unfounded. For example, she may be experiencing changes in bowel habits and be afraid that colon cancer will be diagnosed, when the problem may simply be related to diet or lack of exercise.
- *Be sure the doctor talks with your aging family member about options for life-saving treatment.* The doctor needs to know what your family member's specific preferences are for such treatments as resuscitation, chemotherapy, feeding tubes, and ventilators. Such options are known as "advanced medical directives," or "health care proxies," and can be kept in the patient's medical file. The file is consulted when a person is unable to make decisions regarding medical treatment.

In case of hospitalization

There may come a time when your aging family member needs to be hospitalized, either planned or unplanned. It may be for a few simple tests, for a needed surgical procedure, or in response to an emergency. In such situations, here are some questions to ask the doctor:

- What tests are being performed?
- What procedures are involved?
- What is the estimated length of the hospital stay?
- What side effects of anesthesia, medications, and surgical procedures can be expected?
- What limitations will my family member have after being released from the hospital?

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- What changes will need to be made in his plan of care, living arrangements, or ongoing medical treatment?

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