

QUALITY HEALTH CARE:

How Patients Can Communicate Better with Doctors



What does it mean to be partners in health care? That is when doctors and patients work closely together—talking about health problems, making thoughtful choices, and coming up with plans that patients can, and will, follow.

This brochure looks at many aspects of quality health care. It includes:

- Questions about how you and your doctor communicate.
- Results showing how Massachusetts patients answered these questions.
- Boxes to check with your answers about quality health care.
- Ways that patients can partner with their doctors.

We hope that this helps explain some aspects of quality health care. For more information, visit MHQP's website www.mhqp.org.



You want quality health care. Your doctor wants that, too. But is your health care as good as it should be? *Consumer Reports and Massachusetts Health Quality Partners (MHQP)* teamed up to answer that question.

The best quality health care takes place when doctors – along with nurse practitioners, physician assistants, other clinicians, and office staff – work as partners with patients, family members, caregivers, and the public.

Below are questions you can answer about experiences with your doctor. There are also lists of what patients can do to help make care better.

How often does your doctor show respect for what you say?

In a survey of Massachusetts patients, 87% said that their doctors always do this. Does your doctor show respect for what you have to say?

Yes, always Sometimes No, never

What you can do:

- Tell the doctor about topics that matter most to you. For instance, speak up if your doctor is talking about the benefits of a certain treatment but you want to know more about pain or other side effects.
- Say something if you think the doctor is not listening or being respectful. For instance, tell the doctor, "I think you're not hearing what I'm saying."

Good communication means that doctors explain things clearly, listen carefully, and show respect.





How often does your doctor listen carefully to you?

In a survey of Massachusetts patients, 83% said that their doctors always do this. Does your doctor listen carefully to you?

Yes, always Sometimes No, never

What you can do:

- Speak up if you want the doctor to make eye contact. This means looking at you rather than at a computer or someone else in the room. Tell the doctor if you prefer that he or she sits when talking with you.
- Ask the doctor to repeat back what you just said. That helps to make sure that the doctor clearly understood you.
- When you are at home, call the doctor's office if you have any questions or concerns. You might ask to meet with the doctor again, either in person or by phone. Find out if you should instead speak with a nurse practitioner, physician's assistant, or someone else in the doctor's office.

Doctors should communicate with patients in ways that are clear, honest, and easy to understand. Studies show that this type of communication can help patients stay healthy or if sick, get better faster.

Does your doctor explain things in ways that are easy to understand?

In a survey of Massachusetts patients, 84% said that their doctors always do this. Does your doctor explain things in ways that you find easy to understand?

Yes, always Sometimes No, never

What you can do:

- State your symptoms clearly. Tell your doctor when this symptom or health problem started, what it feels like, and how long it lasts.
- Ask the doctor about your diagnosis (what is wrong) and treatment (what you should do). Make sure you understand the doctor's answer. Repeat back key points about what the doctor said. Ask again, or even interrupt, if you are confused about what the doctor says.
- Talk about treatment choices. There are many times when your doctor should ask you to make choices about what kind of treatment, tests, medicine, or surgery to have. Talk about these together. Ask about risks (what can go wrong) and benefits (how this can help). Also discuss your beliefs, values, and other issues that may affect your choices.
- Write notes while meeting with the doctor. Notes can remind you later about what the doctor said.
- At the end of each doctor's visit, ask for a printed summary of your diagnosis, medication, and follow-up plan (what you need to do later on).
- If you want, ask a family member or friend to go to appointments with you. He or she can help by asking questions, taking notes, and talking with you about what the doctor said.
- Ask how to learn more. This could be by meeting with someone, reading an article, or going to certain websites.

Rosalind Joffe of Newton, Mass has been dealing with chronic disease for more than 35 years. She says that there still are times when she doesn't hear new information very well. Joffe sometimes asks her husband to go with her to appointments so she will feel less overwhelmed.

How often does your doctor spend enough time with you?

In a survey of Massachusetts patients, 79% said that their doctors always do this. Does your doctor spend enough time with you?

Yes, always Sometimes No, never

What you can do:

- When you call to make an appointment, tell the office staff if this is for a new health concern. The staff may be able to add extra time to your appointment.
- Before you meet with the doctor, make a list of questions and concerns to discuss. Put the most important items at the top. Bring this list to your appointment and refer to it while talking with the doctor.
- Ask if there is someone else in the doctor's office you can talk with about less urgent questions and concerns.

Even though doctors are very busy, there are many reasons not to rush when meeting with patients. Studies show that when doctors spend more time with patients, they tend to write fewer prescriptions. When not rushed, doctors also have more time to talk with patients about ways to stay healthy and prevent or detect diseases.



Massachusetts Health Quality Partners (MHQP) is a coalition of doctors, patients, hospitals, health plans, government agencies, and other health care organizations working to improve the quality of health care in Massachusetts. To learn more go to www.mhqp.org.

Ways to learn more about quality health care:

- *Consumer Reports* is an expert, independent, nonprofit organization that works to ensure a fair, just, and safe marketplace for all consumers and empower consumers to protect themselves. Learn more at www.consumerreports.org.
- Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' *Physician Compare* website has information about Medicare-enrolled physicians and health care professionals <http://www.medicare.gov/find-a-doctor/>.
- The Massachusetts Board of Registry in Medicine is a state agency that allows patients to learn about their doctors or file a complaint. The website is www.mass.gov/massmedboard.

When patients have a good experience with doctors, they are more likely to come back for tests, take medications as prescribed, and better manage their care at home. Quality health care matters a lot to both patients and doctors.

—Michael Cantor, M.D., Chief Medical Officer of the New England Quality Care Alliance.

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