

10 TIPS ON TALKING TO YOUR DOC

by Dr. Robert A. Sandhaus

When dealing with COPD, two-way communication is key. Here's how to cut through the jargon and make a connection.

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Do you feel tongue-tied when you walk into a doctor's office? Do you try to carry on a conversation in English, but your physician seems to be speaking Latin? You're not alone. Good health care begins with good communication. Put the following tips into practice the next time you talk with your doc.

1. Think of your doc as your partner, not your boss.

Modern health care requires you, as a patient, to become an equal partner in understanding and treating your condition. You and your doctor must tackle health problems side by side, as a team.

2. Be honest, and demand honesty in return.

Still having trouble quitting smoking? Tell your doc! Can't quite get the hang of using the latest inhaler? Talk about it! If you want your doc to be straight with you, say so.

3. Know your meds and report any problems.

Every several visits, review all your medications with your doctor to find out whether you can reduce or eliminate any. Don't hesitate to ask about side effects and interactions between drugs. Find out what changes to your medications you should make on your own in response to changes in your condition.

4. Discuss exercise.

Keep up an exercise program, no matter how limited. Pulmonary rehabilitation has been shown to improve the health of people with COPD.

5. Report any sleep problems.

People with COPD often have trouble sleeping. Problems include breathing abnormalities and low oxygen levels. Symptoms of breathing problems during

sleep include snoring, morning headache, daytime sleepiness, changes in personality and sex drive, and stopping breathing while asleep.

6. Talk about any changes since your last visit.

Unless you report changes in your health, your doc will assume you're doing exactly as you were the last time you visited. Keep your physician up to date every time.

7. Insist on appropriate testing.

Your doc will probably order sophisticated pulmonary function testing and perhaps a high-resolution CT scan of your lungs. If these words sound foreign to you, check with your doc about ordering a scan. They are the best ways to diagnose and follow your COPD.

8. Get tested for Alpha-1.

As many as 1 out of every 30 people with COPD may have alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency (called simply "Alpha-1") and not know it. Alpha-1 is a genetic condition that has a specific therapy distinct from other therapies for COPD. You can pass the genes for Alpha-1 to your kids.

9. Know that your doc may feel as frustrated as you.

Physicians are accustomed to treating a medical condition and curing it. COPD is a life-long diagnosis that currently has no cure.

10. Insist that your doc listens.

You must be able to talk about your problems and have confidence that your doc is listening. He or she should explain your diagnosis and treatment in ways that you can understand. If that's not the case, then perhaps a different doc would be better for you.

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