

A few ideas on how to get the best from your GP

(and how your GP can get the best of his or her time with you)

This leaflet is for people with a mental health problem and for anyone involved in supporting or caring for them. These are some ideas for answers to questions we've been asked over the years, although they probably only apply to UK. There are no complete answers to any problem, but hopefully some of these may be of use. If you've got any other or better ideas, please let us know.

How often should a review of my medicines and care be done?

Sadly there is no definite answer to this. People who are stable but who have had long-term mental health problems should probably have a review at least every year, including looking at your physical health e.g. weight, blood etc.

How can my carer or partner help me when I need it without being excluded by the GP?

If you have a carer or partner, register this with your GP so he or she knows you have one.

You can ask for your carer or partner to be registered as a carer on the GP's system. You need to do this when you are well and, when you are well, give your carer permission to speak to them. Your GP will then almost expect your carer will be there and will be more likely to speak to them. This means your carer is more likely to "get past the receptionist" when needed. The surgery may have a special form for this purpose.

If you agree, your GP will also keep an up-to-date name of your key worker, if you have one, and the name of a friend or family member to contact in times of crisis.

Seeing your GP

Be aware that being very anxious can affect your memory, especially in the short-term. So, if you are nervous, worried or in a "bit of a state", you might not remember what you wanted to say or what the answers were.

Here are some simple tricks to help you:

- Write down your questions in advance, so you don't forget to ask them
- When you write the questions on a piece of paper leave a space after each one. Then you can ask your GP to write the answers down for you
- Keep a diary of your symptoms. When you next see your GP you can say "these are the symptoms I've had since we last met"
- If possible take someone you trust with you to your appointments so they can help you, support you, remember what was said and even carry on if you are too upset
- Take a list of the medicines you need in case you forget to ask
- Reassure your GP that you're not trying to tell him or her what to do, just trying to be organised to make the most of your time together.

What to do in crisis:

Make sure you have someone with you, but the best way to deal with a crisis is to be planned.

- You can do an “Advance Directive”, which tells other people what you do and do not want when you are ill. It should really be called an “Advance Refusal” because you can’t say what treatment you want but you can say what you do NOT want. This can be on a piece of paper (informal) or you can do it formally on a set form. Ask your GP, nurse or psychiatrist for advice on this
- You can also use the “Handy History and Crisis Plan” sheet on our website so you have a sheet or two you can hand to someone trying to help you.

Make sure you are on the GP’s Practice Register

Some GPs in the UK have a practice register. This register is just a list on their computer, mainly to remind your GP or nurse of how and when he or she should be helping you. It includes inviting you for an annual health check. GP practices are also doing similar things for people who have other long-term conditions e.g. diabetes, asthma and heart disease.

- Your GP must ask you if he or she can put your name on the “practice register”
- The information on this register is confidential
- You don’t have to be on the register. But if you aren’t you may miss being called for an annual check
- You may see your GP or practice nurse more often than every year if you think it is required
- You can change your mind at any time about being on the register.

Physical Health Checks

Physical health can easily be overlooked. For example, having a diagnosis of schizophrenia or manic-depression (also known as bipolar disorder) increases the risk of physical health problems. Some medicines may also have an impact on your physical health.

When you have a physical health check, your GP or practice nurse will:

- Take your blood pressure
- Take your pulse
- Do a urine or blood test
- Weigh you.

You can also ask for advice on:

- Smoking, alcohol and drugs
- Physical exercise
- Healthy eating
- Screening for other health problems and
- Whether you need a ‘flu jab.

For those people on lithium, the GP will want to make sure you have had a blood test every three months. You may also need blood tests for other medicines.

Talking about medicines

If you and the GP are happy with the medicines you are taking he or she may ask you to continue with them. If there are any problems with your medicines, your GP may change them or talk to you about referring you back to your mental health team if required.

Summary

- You are the expert in how you feel
- Looking after yourself is important. If your health changes in any way or you are worried about your health it is worth going to your GP (or telling your key worker if you have one)
- Your practice nurse or GP are there to support you to be healthy and to stay healthy
- Your practice nurse or GP can help you look after your physical health and mental health, and give advice on the medicines you are taking
- You may only need an annual health check but if required you may need to visit your GP practice more frequently
- If there are any problems with your mental health, or mental health medication, your GP will talk to you and may refer you back to your mental health team.

Other little tips from people with the necessary experience:

If you or your carer phone up the GP or surgery and you are not getting very far, one turn of phrase that may help is "I'm not asking you to talk to me, I'm just asking you to listen to me. What you then do with the information is up to you."

Have you got any other ideas of things that have helped you or helped others that you might share with other people? If so, it would be great if we could include you and thank you (just give us a pen name if you want!).

With that in mind, thank you to my brown-eyed girl from MIND in Norwich for some of these ideas.