

# Doctor Visit Smarts

A TOP GERIATRICIAN OFFERS ADVICE ON HOW OLDER ADULTS CAN MAKE THE MOST OF THEIR NEXT MEDICAL APPOINTMENT

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**IF YOU'RE AN OLDER ADULT, YOUR DOCTOR VISITS MAY FEEL DIFFERENT THAN THEY DID WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER.** That's due in part because people often develop multiple health problems as they age.

"Many older patients have a collection of medical conditions—like hypertension and heart failure, maybe a little bit of renal failure, maybe type 2 diabetes or high cholesterol—so we have to manage all of those things," says Jeremy Walston, MD, professor of geriatric medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "If you see a geriatrician or other health care provider who focuses on aging, they will also want to check you for cognitive changes and difficulties with moving and walking," says Walston, "and to get a sense of your social life."

Given this complexity, it's wise to come to appointments well-prepared, which boosts your chances of a productive visit. "It's important to think carefully ahead of time about what you want to accomplish," Walston says. He recommends jotting down three priorities or health concerns that you want to discuss

with your doctor so that those things don't get missed in a brief appointment. Explain your care preferences and health goals.

It helps the doctor to have an up-to-date list of your medications and any supplements you take. Come with a written list or bring all of your medications and supplements in their original containers to the appointment. Also bring information about any hospital stays or emergency room visits since your last appointment. "We encourage patients to get good documentation from their hospitalization and make sure that that information gets sent to the primary care doctor or the patient physically carries a discharge summary in with them," says Walston.

If you have trouble with memory or difficulties moving, such as walking or standing up from a seated position, Walston urges you to speak up at the appointment. Your doctor is increasingly likely to have solutions to help. "We have better and better ways to manage functional and cognitive decline to slow the trajectory," he says.

## ASK YOUR DOCTOR

### Q Should I see a geriatrician?

These physicians specialize in caring for older adults and are "in tune with the function, cognition, and social issues that an older adult might have," says geriatrician Jeremy Walston, MD. They're also experienced in managing patients with multiple health conditions. You're eligible to visit a geriatrician at age 65, but many of Walston's patients start seeing him in their 70s or 80s.

### Q Can you watch me walk?

Geriatricians are particularly equipped to help address functional health problems, such as difficulty with movement or frequent falls. No matter which type of health provider you see, it's hard to be assessed if you're sitting still. Ask to be checked in motion, Walston suggests.

### Q I'm worried about my memory. Are these symptoms normal?

If you worry that you're having a decline in memory or mental ability, let the doctor know. Some memory problems are caused by reversible conditions, so get a diagnosis as soon as possible. Bring up depression, too, if that is a concern.

### Q Can you review how I am supposed to take medications?

Many older adults take multiple medications and supplements, which can get complicated. Speak up if you want a refresher on how and when to take them.

