

How to Become a Wise Medical Consumer

Dr. Albert Schweitzer once said, "Each patient carries his own doctor inside him. We are at our best when the doctor who resides within each patient has the chance to go to work." To get better medical care today, we all need to learn how to become better advocates for ourselves and our loved ones. These are two examples of medical consumers: passive patients and active patients.

Passive patients rarely question their doctor. This happens when one believes that the doctor should figure out what is wrong and what should be done about it. Active patients expect to help make medical decisions. They ask questions and learn as much as they can about their medical problems. Active patients work with their doctors to develop effective treatment plans. Sometimes it is OK to be a passive patient, especially when the medical problem is not too complex and will not become a chronic condition or one that will require much medical intervention. At other times, we need to learn as much as we can and to help coordinate between medical specialists. Molly Mettler, MSW and Donald W. Kemper in their book, *Healthwise for Life*, have these suggestions.

How can we do just this? Here are some tips that may help.

1. Tell your doctor you want to be a partner in treatment decisions. This will help him or her know that it is important to you to know all of your options, get a second opinion, and have the opportunity to think about the best plan.
2. Be honest with your doctor. To be a good partner, you need to be open and honest with your doctor. If you don't plan on taking a particular medication, say so. If you are upset or worried, tell your doctor about your concerns.
3. Prepare for your office visits. For every doctor visit bring along a written list of your problems, symptoms, and current medications/herbals/vitamins that you take.
4. Ask "why" before agreeing to any medical test, medication, or treatment. By asking "why," you will often discover alternatives that may better meet your needs.
5. Ask about alternatives. There may be more than one course of action. Explore these alternatives with him/her.
6. Write it down. Take notes on all important information that you discuss. Writing down this information will help you to understand and explain it if you need to share it with others. Along with writing things down, it may be helpful to have someone else with you to also hear what your doctor is explaining.
7. Review and summarize. At the end of the visit, ask if you can briefly repeat what you think the doctor said. If the doctor corrects your description, change your notes.

All of the above ideas will help all of us become more informed about our health and hopefully better able to use information from our personal physicians.