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## Partners for Life

How to be a winning member of your healthcare team

BY ANNETTE RACOND

Neal Barnard, MD, tells patients to think of their doctors in much the same way they do their accountants. “You’re going to ask your accountant why you should be throwing \$10,000 into a retirement fund or why you shouldn’t take certain deductions,” says Barnard, founder of the Washington, DC-based Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine and author of eight books, including *Foods that Fight Pain* (Three Rivers

Press, 1998). If you do that, he says, “you’ll expect satisfactory answers. But when people see a white coat, they often lose perspective of who is in control.”

Partnering with your healthcare team requires taking the lead. With time being a rare and precious commodity, you as a patient need to be assertive and organized when it comes to managing your health. By taking the following steps, you’ll maximize your health and

minimize a lot of the headaches inherent in today’s medical arena.

- **STAY IN CHARGE.** Holly Lucille, ND, RN, based in Beverly Hills and author of *Creating and Maintaining Balance: A Woman’s Guide to Safe, Natural, Hormone Health* (IMPAKT Health, 2004) urges patients to become educated consumers. “You have to take full responsibility for whatever you put into your body. If you’re uncomfortable with your doctors’ recommendations, tell them you appreciate their input and will consider their suggestions.” And then...

- **GET A SECOND OPINION.** Having someone with a different approach diagnose your condition can provide an often necessary perspective. And, of course, you can also do some research into your symptoms on your own.

- **FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH YOUR MEDICAL DECISIONS.** “I’m always surprised by patients who tell me ‘I’m taking those things I was told to take for that condition I was told I have,’” says Lucille. “No one leaves my office without understanding why I have recommended something. Patients need to start taking back their power.”

- **GET YOUR MEDICAL RECORDS.** With an increasing number of practitioners contributing to a single patient’s treatment plan, Jane Guiltinan, ND, director of the Center for Women’s Health and faculty member at Bastyr University near Seattle, says it’s essential for patients to obtain copies of their medical records and also to request that these records be sent to their entire healthcare team. This way, she says, everyone involved in your care will have easy access to your most recent treatments.

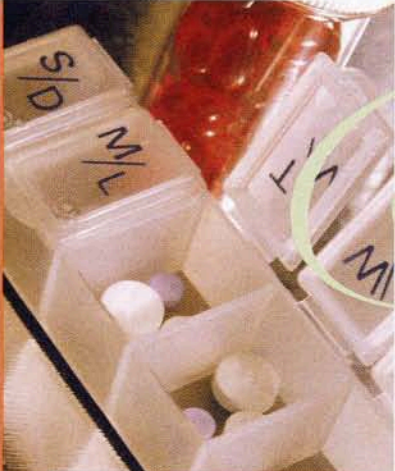
- **COME PREPARED.** Guiltinan advocates writing down questions before your appointment. You may not be feeling your best—that’s probably why you’re seeking medical care—so it’s not uncommon to forget some of your questions. “It’s easy to get stupid in a doctor’s office,” adds Guiltinan. “I’ve walked into my doctor’s office and can’t for the life of me remember everything I wanted to ask.”

• **ASK HARD QUESTIONS.** Conversations often get sidetracked, says Barnard, so it's easy to overlook some of your concerns. One concern should involve supplements—especially when a health-care practitioner sells what he or she recommends. Before plunking down your hard-earned money, find out if you really need them and ask to see any relevant studies. “I’m very uneasy when I hear about patients leaving a doctor’s office with large collections of expensive supplements,” he says. “There are times when it’s appropriate, but in many instances that’s not the case.”

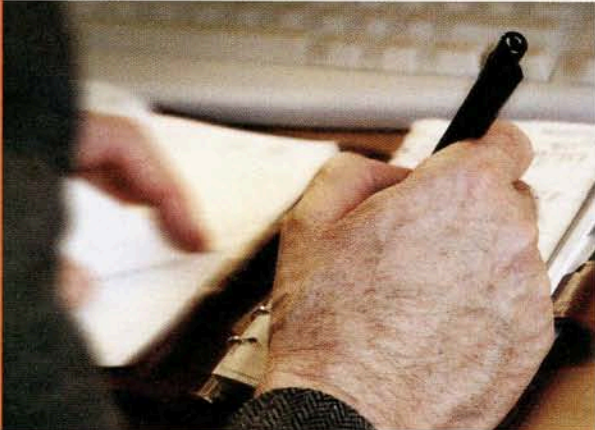
• **ENLIST A STENO.** Guiltinan says studies reveal that patients retain about seven percent of what is said to them during a typical doctor’s visit. Having a friend or family member take notes ensures that critical facts are noted for future reference.

• **BRING YOUR PARTNER.** According to Barnard, having a spouse or partner attend an office visit can often prove helpful, especially if the prescribed treatment plan affects that person, too. “If I’m asking a patient to follow a low-fat diet,” explains Barnard, “that person will do a lot better if I also speak to his or her spouse. Following a special diet is really a prescription for two because both individuals will be eating. Bringing along your spouse gives that person an opportunity to ask questions and allows me to enlist him or her in the effort.”

• **CATALOG YOUR MEDS.** Denette King, NMD, in Tempe, Arizona believes in the importance of attending to details—



*Bring a list of all your meds (or the meds themselves) with you ... and don't forget to ask your spouse or a friend to come along as your scribe.*



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down to the last milligram. When King asks her patients what medications, vitamins, and other supplements they're taking and they respond with a shrug, she tells them to bring all the meds along on their next visit. "Beyond *what* you're taking, it's also essential for your doctor to know *how much* you're taking of any given drug or supplement," adds King.

• **VOICE YOUR CONCERNS UP FRONT.** According to Julie Jacobson, MD, of Ballard Neighborhood Doctors in Seattle, many people aren't sure how to broach certain subjects, so they wait

Beyond your doctor's choice of words you have to examine your own language.

until the very last minute. "I've had patients tell me they came in for a cold, and right as our appointment is winding up, they'll say something like, 'Oh, I'm also really depressed and thinking about hurting myself.' They reveal the real issue right as I'm walking out the door, making me even more behind for my next appointment. Be clear about your needs. Your doctors are there to help you, but you need to help them do their job."

• **STAY POSITIVE.** There's a greater chance of having a winning outcome if you believe in your practitioner's ability to heal. A patient's intuitive sense about a treatment plan plays an integral role in its outcome. "Beyond your doctor's choice of words," notes Bernie Siegel, MD, author of numerous books on healing, including *Help Me to Heal* (Hay House, 2003), "you have to examine your own language. Do you see your treatment as punishment? Your ideas can have a hypnotic effect in a negative sense. Fortunately, the opposite also holds true." **AM**

Annette Racond is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles.