Supporting Someone Who is Going to the Doctor

Support Person Fact Sheet

Key Facts

It can be hard for a doctor to figure out what health problem(s) may be affecting a person with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (I/DD), especially if the person has limited communication. Most doctors are busy and try to keep appointments within a limited time frame. Therefore, it is critical to be well prepared to make the most of the time spent with the doctor

Making an Appointment

If waiting in the waiting room is difficult, it may be possible to schedule the first appointment of the day or the first appointment after the doctor's lunch break to minimize time spent in the waiting room. It is a good idea to build a relationship with the receptionist and explain any special needs or requirements. If there is a lot to ask the doctor, it may be possible to schedule a double appointment.

Helpful Tips to Support Being Prepared

Tip 1: Explain why (and when) they are going. It is important that the person is clear about the reason for the visit. If they are anxious, provide reassurance.

Tip 2: Ask in advance what questions they may have for the doctor, and write them down.

Tip 3: The person can take someone with them for support if they choose. Is there is a disability professional the doctor should talk to who has assessed the person's behavior - such as a psychologist? If so, maybe they could attend or write a report.

If an Accommodation is Needed

It is important to ask for any necessary accommodations in advance, when the person is making the appointment. Encourage them to tell the receptionist what kind of reasonable accommodation(s) they would like to request, and let them decide what works best for them.

During the Visit

- Encourage the person to ask any questions they would like answered.
- If you are accompanying the person during their visit, ask the doctor to talk directly to the person. For example, the doctor should explain if they want to examine the person and check with the person if that is okay. Model how the doctor can talk to the person about health issues. Check if the person wants to ask any questions.
- Make sure the person clearly understands all information needed to decide about treatment options. Remember, the doctor needs consent from the person or a "person responsible", usually a guardian or family member.
- If a new medication is being prescribed, support the person to ask about side effects or any other questions they have about the medication.
- Ask the doctor to write down instructions in plain language and explain difficult words.

After the Visit

- Check that the person understood what happened and what the doctor said.
- Work with the person to make sure there is a system in place to carry out any instructions they received from the doctor. Think about who needs to know about the instructions and who can help with any necessary monitoring.
- Determine whether or not other health care professionals need to know what the doctor said. For example, a psychologist who is helping with the person's behavior or a speech pathologist who is helping with swallowing problems may need to be aware of any new medical information.
- If the person is not clear on what the doctor recommended, support them in calling the doctor's office, if necessary. Some doctors are also happy to clarify things by email.
- Help the person plan when they should go back to the doctor.

For more information:

Click here to learn about important questions you may want to ask the doctor (URL: https://www.ahrq.gov/questions/be-engaged/index.html)

Related fact sheets:

Support Person Fact Sheet: Supporting Annual Wellness Check-Ups
Support Person Fact Sheet: Helping with Communication with the Doctor

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OSAC Oregon Self Advocacy Coalition

OHSU

OCDD Oregon Council on Developmental Disabilities