

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

CARING FOR YOUR PARENTS: EDUCATION FOR THE FAMILY CAREGIVER®



 Home
Instead
SENIOR CARE®
To us, it's personal.

The normal aging process, which may involve sensory loss, decline in memory, and slower processing of information can make a doctor's visit a troubling and scary proposition for many seniors. Truly at a time when they need to have the best communication possible with their healthcare providers, the challenges of aging makes it most difficult.

Helping your parents prepare for visits with their medical professionals can assure that they will receive the best care possible and have positive outcomes.

This workshop will outline why it's important for your parents to have good communication with their healthcare providers and the possible consequences of not doing so. For example, according to a 2006 article in the Washington Post at least *1.5 million* Americans are sickened, injured or killed each year by errors in prescribing, dispensing and taking medications.

After we look about what good communication can offer, we'll see what legal forms and other documents your parents need in order to assure that their medical wishes will be met, even if they are not in a position to communicate it directly.

Finally we'll provide you with tips and strategies for your parents to follow before, during and after a visit with a healthcare provider.



Did you know...?

According to the *Handbook of Communication and Aging Research*, in the United States, people over the age of 65 visit their doctor an average of eight times per year, compared to the general population's average of five visits per year.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE GOOD COMMUNICATION

As our parents age and have increasing health problems, there is the likelihood that they will have more than one doctor or medical practitioner in their life. A primary care physician may be the quarterback of your parent's general care, but it is likely other team members – such as medical specialists, physical therapists, eye doctors, mental health counselors, pharmacists, chiropractors, and acupuncturists – will play a part in managing their health.

Having so many healthcare providers can be confusing and overwhelming. Remembering to follow all of their different instructions or making sure they all know what each other is prescribing might be more than your parent can manage.

Volunteering to step in and offering help and support may be just what your parent needs in order to maintain or improve their health. Here are a number of reasons why your support might help improve communication with healthcare providers:

- **One benefit to improving communications is reduced repeat visits.** Often, seniors will go back to the doctor or visit several doctors for the same issue because they forgot to mention something before, such as a symptom or a new medication prescribed by another healthcare provider. By being prepared for visits, they can likely get the treatment right the first time.

- **By going in armed with all of their medical details, they can help avoid medical errors.** These errors could not only make them sicker, but could jeopardize their life. And it's not just visits to the doctor that they need to be diligent about. When going to the pharmacy, especially if they use more than one pharmacy, it's important that your parent have all the details of their medications and over-the-counter drugs to avoid potentially life-threatening drug interactions.
- **With better communication, your parents can really become active partners in managing their own health.** It can also give them the confidence they need to ask for more information and discuss the risks and benefits of treatment options.
- **They are also more likely to understand their medical conditions.** A thorough understanding enables them to follow through on their treatment plans, reduce the risk, and find support from other people in similar situations.

In the end, good healthcare communication means your parents can maintain some of the independence they desire. That's great for both them and you as their caregiver.

Notes:

LEGAL DOCUMENTATION AND MEDICAL HISTORY

To play an active role in the management of your parent's healthcare, especially through communications with their medical providers, the first thing you'll need to have them do is sign a **medical release form**.

A federal law known as HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) protects the privacy of everyone's medical information. HIPAA does not allow your parent's health care providers to share their medical information with anyone unless your parents can give them permission by filling out an "**Authorization for Release of Information**" form.

You can ask your parent's medical providers if they require a specific form, but there are many generic forms on the Internet that you can download. In general the form should include the following information:

- Your parent's name and date of birth
- The name of the health care provider or organization who is releasing the information
- The name of the person, such as yourself with whom the information can be shared

Tip

Do let your parent know that these permission forms can be canceled by them at any time and for any reason.

- What information your parents wish shared
- The dates when the information can be shared
- Your parent’s signature

The next three forms that you may want to suggest to your parents are called **Advance Medical Directives**. These forms pertain to treatment preferences and the designation of a surrogate decision-maker in the event that your parent should become unable to make medical decisions on his or her own behalf.

Advance directives generally fall into three categories: health care proxy, durable power of attorney, and living will:

Category	Description
<p>Health Care Proxy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a legal document in which your parent designates another person to make health care decisions if he or she is rendered incapable of making their wishes known. • The health care proxy has, in essence, the same rights to request or refuse treatment that the individual would have if capable of making and communicating decisions.
<p>Medical Power of Attorney (also known as a Power of Attorney for Healthcare, or Patient Advocate Designation)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Names a specific person to act as the patient's "agent," "proxy," or "attorney-in-fact." • It generally gives the appointed person legal authority to ensure the patient's wishes are followed and make all other decisions related to their medical care, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Consenting to or refusing any medical treatment or diagnostic procedure related to physical or mental health, including artificial nutrition and hydration, ○ Hiring and firing medical providers, ○ Admitting them to and discharging them from hospitals and long-term care facilities, ○ Accessing all medical records, and ○ Giving directions regarding organ donation.
<p>Living Will</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specifies in writing what types of medical treatments are desired. • The most common statement in a living will reads: <i>“If I suffer an incurable, irreversible illness, disease, or condition and my attending physician determines that my condition is terminal, I direct that life-sustaining measures that would serve only to prolong dying be withheld or discontinued.”</i> • Lets medical professionals and other decision makers know your parent’s preferences and can authorize someone to speak on the person's behalf. • Without a living will, patients who can't communicate may be left to the confused decisions of squabbling family members or the mercy of doctors who might use artificial means to prolong life, or refuse to do so.

In addition to discussing advanced directives with your parent, you can help him or her pull together a **personal medical history**.

This written list should include:

- dates of health visits
- sicknesses
- treatments
- immunizations
- childhood illnesses
- medications
- allergies
- hospitalizations
- surgeries
- doctors' names
- insurance information
- other significant family medical issues
- relevant lifestyle activities and work history

Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) Order

Your parent may also want to consider having an out-of-hospital do not resuscitate order. This document allows your parent to state that they do not want to be resuscitated if they stop breathing or their heart stops beating. Without this document, calling 911 will always result in resuscitative attempts.



It's a good idea for both you and your parents to have a copy of this information and for them to take a copy to medical appointments – especially if it's with someone new.

Notes:

TIPS FOR YOU AND THE HEALTHCARE PROVIDER TO FOLLOW

Before any medical appointment, try to help your parent prepare for the visit:

- **Make sure they have a copy of their medical history to share with any new healthcare providers.** If it's a visit to a specialist as a result of some other event or diagnosis, your parent should bring medical records, including any diagnostic or other test results.
- **Have your parent write down questions related to the topic and take it with them to the appointment.** It is a good idea to focus on one subject or issue per visit.
- **If you think that extra time might be needed, be sure to call ahead so the doctor's office can accommodate this request.** This demonstrates respect for the doctor's schedule, but it also may assure that mom or dad isn't going to feel overly rushed and can get the information they need.

At the appointment, there are some good practices your parent should follow:

- **Ask to sit face-to-face with the healthcare provider.** This is especially important if your parent has vision or hearing issues.
- **Take notes and frequently summarize what the doctor says to make sure they have heard it correctly.** This also gives your parent the opportunity to ask for clarification on something that might have been misunderstood the first time around. It can also be a benefit to the doctor because he or she wants to make sure that what they are saying is being understood.
- **Remember that it's OK to ask questions.** Your parents might not want to appear like a pest so they often just let things go. But the reality is this is their health they are dealing with and it should always be OK for them to ask as many questions as necessary to be comfortable in their own knowledge.
- **Ask for any follow-up instructions in writing.** This way they can refer to it later and if you or other family members have a question, the information will be readily available to review.

Tip

You may not need to go on every doctor visit, but you might hear something they don't or be able to explain any symptoms or changes that might develop. If you do go to the appointment, you may need to have your parent fill out a medical information release form giving you permission to speak with the doctor directly at any time.

After the appointment, if either you or your parent is dissatisfied with the healthcare received, it's vital that you speak up:

- If your parent's doctor is part of a practice, **ask to speak with the manager at that practice.** Your parent may be referred to another practitioner if the situation can not be resolved.
- Depending on the nature of the problem, **you might also consider filing a report with the state licensing board** responsible for covering that particular healthcare provider.

Never fear taking your case to higher authorities. Both your parent's health and that of others may be at stake.

Notes:

TAKING ACTION

As more medical options become available and your parents' health changes, it's important to provide them with some guidance about how to manage the healthcare process. Doing so could help them to have longer and healthier life.

Think about your next steps, and how you can create your own action plan:

1. The first thing I will do to improve the communication between my parents and their healthcare providers is:
2. Resources I need to search, talk to, or meet with before the next doctor's appointment are:
3. The most important questions for me to ask my parent's healthcare providers are:

