



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

# doctor-patient relationships

Doctors often order tests and recommend drugs or procedures when they shouldn't—sometimes even when they know they shouldn't. In fact, nearly half of primary-care physicians say their own patients get too much medical care, according to a survey published in 2011 by researchers at Dartmouth College.

All that unneeded care can be hazardous to your health—and your wallet. For example, X-rays and CT scans expose you to potentially cancer-causing radiation, and can lead to follow-up tests and treatment with additional risks.

The problem has become so serious that a coalition of medical societies, in a project called *Choosing Wisely*<sup>®</sup>, has compiled lists of tests and treatments doctors themselves say are done too often.

You can do your part by making sure you're able to discuss everything with your doctor. One big step in that direction: understanding where your doctor's coming from. When Consumer Reports surveyed hundreds of primary-care physicians, here are some things they told us they wish their patients knew.

» **PHYSICIANS TAKE THE LONG VIEW.** Doctors said that forming a long-term relationship with a primary-care physician is the most important thing a patient can do to obtain better medical care, with 76 percent saying it would help “very much.”

Research seems to back that up. It suggests that patients who frequently switch doctors have more health problems and spend more on care than patients who have a consistent relationship with a single physician.

» **RESPECT IS A TWO-WAY STREET.** Being respectful and courteous toward your physician was the No. 2 thing doctors said patients could do to get better care. But 70 percent said that since they had started practicing medicine, respect and appreciation from patients had gotten “a little” or “much” worse.

Being courteous doesn’t mean you have to be passive. Most doctors said that it was “somewhat” or “very” helpful for patients to ask them questions and occasionally question their recommendations; a mere 4 percent thought those strategies were downright unhelpful.

» **PLEASE TAKE YOUR MEDICINE.** Noncompliance with advice or treatment recommendations was the top complaint doctors had about their patients. Most of the doctors we surveyed said it affected their ability to provide optimal care: 37 percent said it did so “a lot.”

Compliance doesn’t necessarily mean following your doctor’s instructions slavishly. Feel free to discuss, even debate, your doctor’s treatment plan while you’re still in the office. Then do your best to comply. If you’re having side effects, are unsure whether you’re following instructions properly, or experience new or recurrent symptoms, tell your doctor immediately.

» **PAIN IS TOUGH TO TREAT.** When it came to judging their ability to minimize the pain, discomfort, or disability caused by a condition, only 37 percent of physicians thought they were “very” effective, though 60 percent more thought they were “somewhat” effective.

» **IT HELPS TO KEEP TRACK YOURSELF.** Slowly but surely, primary-care doctors are switching over to electronic medical records. But they want you to know that it still pays to keep track of your medical history yourself. Eighty-nine percent said that keeping an informal log of treatments, drugs, changes in condition, notes from previous doctor visits, and tests and procedures could be helpful.

» **RESEARCH ONLINE, BUT CAREFULLY.** Doctors are not convinced that online research is helpful, to put it mildly. Almost half of physicians we surveyed said online research helps very little or not at all, and just 8 percent thought it was very helpful.

So be a smart online researcher. Instead of starting by entering the name of your condition in a search-engine box, try going directly to a few reliable sites. If you find information online that you want to discuss with your doctor, print out only the relevant parts.

» **DOCTORS ARE PRESSED FOR TIME.** Physicians said the sheer volume of insurance paperwork was No. 1 on the list of things that interfere with their ability to provide optimal care. Next was financial pressures that may force the majority of primary-care providers in our survey to work more than 50 hours a week seeing more than 100 patients.

» **THEY TALK TO DRUG SALESPEOPLE MORE THAN YOU MIGHT REALIZE.** The majority of doctors we surveyed said that pharmaceutical company representatives contacted them more than 10 times a month. Thirty-six percent were contacted more than 20 times a month. On average, doctors said they spend a few hours a week dealing with pharmaceutical salespeople.