



Kids As Self Advocates

Communicating With Your Doctor

by [Maia Wroblewski](#)

Maia, now in college, shares her strategy for talking to her doctor when she started to take over management of her health care.

It is completely normal for a youth with a special health care need to have frequent trips to their specialists. However, as children start to grow and turn into young adults it is most likely that they want to start taking care of their own health care visits. Freedom to control our own appointments is a big step to independence. The next step is to be on your own at the actual appointment.

Now I'm sure you're asking how will I manage my own appointment? There are so many questions, the medical words are big, and you may be used to your parent asking the questions and helping to understand what the doctor means. Don't worry, if you take it one step at a time you'll do fine. Here are some ideas for making this change work for you. First, it is best to start weaning yourself of your parents' presence early. Try having your parents come into your appointment, but agree that they won't talk. Go over questions and your health status before the visit, and write anything down that you might forget. Remember: the doctor wants to talk to you, especially as you get older. Also, don't forget to be straightforward with your doctor. I know some things can be embarrassing or 'not cool' to talk about, but you have no reason to be embarrassed.

Doctors also respond better if you use mature language, instead of tummy, say stomach; instead of achy, try being specific about what type of ache you have. If you don't understand something have them write it down, or explain it slower. Finally, review the visit with your parents at the end, this will help you sort out what happened at the visit, and what each of you believe happened at the visit. Here is an example of a recent visit I had.

Nurse: The doctor will be in to see you soon, but first I want to take your blood pressure.

Maia: Okay, most of the time they use my right arm.

Nurse: Then that's the one we'll use. Looks normal to me, have you been feeling fine?

Maia: Yeah, I've been okay.

(Now here is where you can run into problems, the nurse takes the word, 'okay' to mean I am feeling good. I am using the word because I don't want to have to explain how I have felt good off and on during the month)

Nurse: That's good. I'll see you next month.

(20 min and 5 magazines later when the doctor comes in)

Doctor: Maia, how are you. Looks like everything seems to be going well.

Maia: Yes I have been okay.

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Doctor: That's great, any troubles with your stomach? Have you been eating well?

Maia: Yes, I have had a few troubles but I feel fine today.

Doctor: Why don't we take a look at your stomach? Everything feels fine, and you look healthy, any questions?

Maia: No.

Doctor: And your medications are working fine?

Maia: Yes.

Doctor: Great, well I guess then we'll see you in a month. It was nice to talk to you.

Now this visit on a scale from one to ten deserves a two. There was no true conversation and nothing was accomplished. Here are things that can make this situation better. You as the patient need to be specific. If you have had problems during the time since you saw your doctor last, mention them! Doctors are not mind readers, but they are problem-solvers. They need your help to solve the mystery, be descriptive of how you are feeling. Next, although I was feeling fine the day of my visit, I had not been "okay" the entire month. I should have mentioned my problems during the visit. When the doctor asked about my medication I should have asked if he/she had a recent list of my medications. This is an important part of your health and it should be current. Plus, one of your medications might be causing some unwanted but normal side effects that you were not aware of. And finally, I used "one word conversation" this is not helpful or productive in a two person conversation. The more you talk, the more they listen and respond. It will make both of you feel more comfortable.

Let's try that doctor visit one more time.

Nurse: The doctor will be in to see you soon, but first I want to take your blood pressure.

Maia: Okay, most of the time they use my right arm.

Nurse: Then that's the one we'll use. Looks normal to me, have you been feeling fine?

Maia: Well, although I am feeling well today, I have had complications over the past month. I was hoping I could talk to the doctor about some ways I might be able to deal with them.

Nurse: That's fine, I'll mark it down as something you want to ping up, is there anything else?

Maia: I was also hoping we could run through my medications to make sure they're up-to-date.

Nurse: Okay, I'll be sure to mention it. The doctor will be in soon. Have a nice day.

(20 min and 5 magazines later when the doctor comes in)

Doctor: Maia, how are you. Looks like there are a few things that you want to talk about.

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Maia: Yes, I have been having some complications. For example, ... (this is where you can use examples of problems, and explain the patterns or lack of patterns to your problems. Be sure to use descriptions). I am finding that every time I take this new medication I get a red rash on my hands and arms.

Doctor: I see, well I would suggest, ... (this is where the doctor will give suggestions, if you don't understand ASK!) that you stop taking that medication for a week, then start it up again and see if the same thing happens. If you still get a rash, we'll have to complete sensitivity testing.

Maia: I am not sure that I understood the final step, could you explain what you mean by sensitivity testing?

Doctor: Sure ... (repeats it, with more descriptive or simple words, depending) sensitivity testing will be a test on your skin to help us learn if you might be allergic to this new medicine.

Maia: I understand now, I know a lot about allergy testing. I also wanted to give you this update on all my medications.

Doctor: This list is helpful. These two medications together can make you more sensitive to the sun. This might explain your rash. Let's have you start to use a sunblock when you're outside. This might make the problem go away. Thank you, for this list of medications, it was helpful. I'll make sure the nurse updates your chart.

Maia: Okay.

Doctor: Now, why don't we take a look at your stomach. Does anything hurt?

Maia: No, just a few grumbles, but not much else.

Doctor: And how is school, and life?

Maia: Hectic. I have a lot going with school, but I am enjoying my classes. I went with a couple of my friends to a seminar on chemical bonds, and that was pretty interesting. Not much else has happened.

Doctor: Sounds interesting. Does the seminar count towards credit?

Maia: No, but we all had a pretty good time.

Doctor: I'm glad. Well, I think that covers it, do you have any other questions?

Maia: I don't think so, but is there a way to contact you if I do?

Doctor: Sure, just ask the receptionist for my voice mail number (not all doctors will give you such a direct number).

Maia: Thank you and I guess I'll see you next month.

Doctor: Great to see you Maia.

Speaking up for yourself is an important part of becoming an independent adult. Starting early and learning to talk with your doctors and getting your needs met is an important step that you can take.

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