

A prescription for success

Doctor's appointments can seem like a blur if you're not fully prepared for them. **Catherine Osborn** finds out how to make the most of appointments

A patient walks into a doctor's surgery and says: 'Doctor, doctor, I feel like a pair of curtains.'

'Pull yourself together.'

So the old joke goes, but for some people with arthritis an appointment with their GP or consultant can be a daunting experience that leaves them feeling short-changed and frustrated.

The time you have with healthcare professionals may seem all too short, but there is plenty you can do to ensure you get the maximum benefit out of appointments and leave satisfied.

A visit to the GP

If you have arthritis, you may need to visit your GP for a wide range of reasons, such as a diagnosis, because you're having a flare-up or for a regular check-up. On average, GP appointments last around 10 minutes, so how can you make the most of the time you have?

GP Rob Hicks says that people can sometimes book a double appointment if they have a lot of things they want to

discuss. 'For people with arthritis who aren't that mobile, it can take up a couple of minutes to get from the waiting room to the doctor's consultation room,' he says. 'So it's perfectly reasonable to ask your doctor for a double appointment.'

According to Dr Hicks, you can maximise the time you have with your GP by doing some preparation before your appointment. 'People with long-term conditions like arthritis are likely to be asked the same sort of questions every time they go to the doctor's, such as: "When do you have pain?", "What does the pain feel like?", "Where is the pain?" and "How long has it been troubling you?". It's a good idea to rehearse the answers so you can tell your doctor in a matter of seconds.'

Shirley Jones, 71, who has osteoarthritis and psoriatic arthritis agrees: 'Before an appointment, I try to think of all the things I want to say, and sometimes write them down, so I don't leave and think "Oh no, I forgot to ask that".'

Fifty-eight-year-old Gordon Blyth keeps a

mental note of how he's been feeling. 'I try and revise the important points,' he says. 'I also use my wife to jog my memory. I don't want to be thinking about my arthritis all the time, but it's handy to have someone say, "You've been moaning about that".' Gordon has rheumatoid arthritis.

Whilst it can be useful to learn as much as you can about your condition, Dr Hicks warns against information overload. 'I'm not a huge fan of reams of information printed off the internet, particularly when it's from questionable sources that are preying on the vulnerable,' he says. 'But I am a great fan of working with the patient to identify what might have kicked off the pain this time and what we can do to avoid it in the future.'

Alison Mills, who is 37 and has osteoarthritis, says her GP admits that he's not an expert on arthritis and welcomes the information she brings to an appointment. 'My doctor was going to change my medication,' she says. 'I took in a newspaper article about the risks of the new drug he wanted me to try. He was fine with that because he had concerns about it himself.'

Talking to your consultant

Depending on how your condition affects you, you may also see a consultant on a regular basis, usually at your local hospital. These appointments last around 30 minutes on average, but could be longer or



The GP's perspective

Rob Hicks, GP

The ideal outcome of a GP appointment is that the patient ends the consultation feeling happy and satisfied and so does the doctor. The opposite of that is the kind of thing that happens in TV dramas, where the patient storms out of the consultation and no-one's left happy.

People with arthritis might visit their GP for a whole range of reasons. They might be asked to come back for another appointment or after a period of time to review progress or be referred to a specialist. It's good to remember that sometimes things take time.

Honesty is the best policy and it's a two-way process. If you're trying any over-the-counter medication or any complementary therapies, let your doctor know so they can avoid any problems. You should also let your GP know if you have problems swallowing medication as most are now available in liquid form.



shorter depending on the complexity of the problem.

Chris Deighton, consultant rheumatologist at Derbyshire Royal Infirmary, explains some of the reasons people come to see him. 'Most of the people who come to see me are referred by their GP. It may be that there are difficulties working out what the underlying problem is or there may be diagnostic problems. On other occasions, the GP isn't sure what sort of treatments are available.'

You may also be referred to a consultant if you request a specialist opinion, or if your GP feels you would benefit from

access to a multidisciplinary team (MDT) which might include other healthcare professionals, such as physiotherapists and occupational therapists.

For Dr Deighton, a GP's referral letter is a mine of information – it can include the results of any investigations, such as blood tests or examinations, as well as input from the patient because of what they have told their GP.

Like Dr Hicks, Dr Deighton believes there are many ways a person with arthritis can contribute to the success of an appointment. 'Volumes of notes can be off-putting, but a few structured notes can help you to

remember the sequence of events, how the condition has evolved and what kind of treatments they might have tried.'

Dr Deighton also likes patients to bring a recent prescription with them to an appointment so he's knows exactly what medication they are taking. 'Usually that information is included in a good GP letter, but it isn't always,' he says. 'We don't want to be making suggestions about medication that the person with arthritis may already be taking.'

Forty-four-year-old Carrie Wright was diagnosed with juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA) when she was four years old, and has learnt a thing or two about getting the most out of her three-monthly appointments with her consultant. 'Before my rheumatology appointment, I make a mental note of what I'm going to raise,' she says. 'If it's a bad time, I'll jot things down in my diary. If a lot gets discussed or if there's a change in my medication, I'll ask for a copy of the letter the consultant sends to my GP to avoid confusion.' Everyone is entitled to see correspondence that relates to their health care – so ask.

Carrie is also fortunate enough that her hospital has a rheumatology helpline that she can call in advance of an appointment. She also has the option of emailing the rheumatology nurses, which can sometimes save her the effort of going to the hospital.

The consultant's perspective

Chris Deighton, consultant rheumatologist

Sometimes when someone comes to see me I take a history and examine them. I feel I can give information and advice and draw up a management plan and discharge the patient at that point. More commonly when I see a new patient I'll send off some investigations, such as blood tests and X-rays. The results help determine what the next step will be.

Even good GPs don't get everything 100 per cent right and you can't expect them to be experts on every condition, but a GP's referral letter is incredibly useful in any consultation.

It's helpful if a patient has thought about what they want to get out of a consultation. For some patients, the priority is to understand exactly what's happening inside their body, for others it is pain relief. If people have thought the process through beforehand, there's more chance that they'll be satisfied with the results of the consultation.

A passport to better communication

Of course, not everyone is as clued up as Carrie, and as health departments across the UK and many patient organisations are starting to realise, more needs to be done to make appointments effective and to promote understanding between patients and medical professionals.

Reumanet, a Belgian patient organisation for people with arthritis, has piloted the *Healthcare Passport*, a booklet which aims to give people more control over the outcome of appointments. Reumanet carried out a pilot of the passport with 100 people with arthritis between April and May 2007. The passport is likely to be piloted in the UK some time in 2008.

Nele Caeyers, a Reumanet volunteer who co-ordinated the pilot, explains what the passport is. 'It's an A5 booklet which patients take to appointments with them. It has a fixed part which contains general information about them and their doctor, their medication and any operations they've had. There's also a removable part where the patient can write down how they've been feeling and anything in their life that might have had an impact on their condition.'

According to Nele, the passport improves patients' understanding of their own condition, which in turn helps medical professionals. 'People who took part in the pilot said it gave them a better overview of their condition,' she says. 'They started to see their life and their condition as a whole and become more aware.'

The doctors Nele has spoken to about

Tips for appointments

- Keeping a diary or making a list before an appointment can help you remember everything you want to discuss
- Honesty is a two-way process – be sure to let your GP or rheumatologist know about any over-the-counter treatments or complementary therapies you are taking
- Asking for a copy of any letters your rheumatologist sends to your GP is a good way of keeping track of what has been agreed
- If you have a lot to discuss with your GP, ask for a double appointment
- Taking a recent prescription to rheumatology appointments will jog your memory about any medication you are taking

the passport have been enthusiastic. 'The passport improves communication between the patient, their GP and their consultant,' she says. 'Patients ask more questions and they are more involved and doctors like that. *Healthcare Passports* make sure the 10 minutes patients get with their doctor are 100 per cent useful.'

Small things matter

In England, the Department of Health has worked with a number of voluntary organisations to produce *Questions to Ask: Getting the most out of your medical appointment*, a leaflet available in GP surgeries and pharmacies. The leaflet includes a list of suggested questions that you can ask during an appointment and a set of 'top tips' including what you can do both before and after your appointment.

Many user groups also believe that improving healthcare professionals' understanding of arthritis can improve doctor-patient communication. Arthritis Care has been working with umbrella organisation PARE (People with Arthritis and Rheumatism in Europe) to develop a

series of video diaries made by people with arthritis on the theme of 'Small things matter'.

The diaries have given people with arthritis the chance to show how arthritis affects their everyday life and look at a range of issues including access, home adaptations and life at university. Health professionals who have seen them so far have found them enlightening and believe they will inform their future work with patients with arthritis. 'It can be easy for medical practitioners to treat the condition and miss the issues which are significant to the individual. The diaries bring home the need for healthcare professionals to ensure that they ask individuals "What is it that you want to be able to do?" in order to help people meet their goals,' says Léonie Dawson, physiotherapist for the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy.

Teamwork

Good communication between doctor and patient can make all the difference to how successful an appointment is. Personality clashes may be a problem – if this happens to you, ask to see someone else as Carrie did. 'I currently find communication with my rheumatologist successful but I've had past experiences with a rheumatologist where we couldn't seem to find the middle ground. It was hard going. My GP picked up on it and said I could change if I wanted to.'

Both you and your healthcare professional want the best outcome for you, and together you can ensure that happens. As Dr Hicks says: 'It's a case of let's work together to sort your problem out so that you can get on and live life.' **am**

Do you have a successful relationship with your GP or consultant? What are your tips for getting the most out of an appointment? Write to the Editor at: Arthritis News, 18 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2HD or email: Editor@arthritiscare.org.uk



photograph: ©Photolibrary.com

Good communication is key to the success of an appointment