

Make the most of your time

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Do you ever leave the doctor's office feeling like key concerns were not addressed? Do you feel frustrated? Overwhelmed? Rushed?

You're not alone.

Recent research validates your experience. One study found the average doctor's visit lasts less than 20 minutes. Another study showed that doctors interrupt their patients an average of 23 seconds into their initial explanation, sometimes sooner. A third study found that patients remember less than half of what their physicians tell them during the visit.

As health care costs continue to escalate and doctors add more patients, there is only one way out of the quagmire, according to Davis Liu, M.D., author of "Stay Healthy, Live Longer, Spend Wisely" (Stetho Publishing, \$24.95): Patients must step up to serve as their own health care advocate.

"Under managed care, doctors are paid based on the number of patients they see each day," explained Liu, whose book is scheduled to debut in February.

Which is why preparing yourself before going into your next doctor's appointment is so critical.

Here are Liu's suggestions for making the most of your visit:

■ Zero in on your top four concerns, write them down if you like, but do not walk in with a laundry list of ailments, which, according to Liu, is the most common patient mistake.

"By coming in with a really long list, you're only shooting yourself in the foot," Liu said. "Long lists make it difficult for the doctor to figure out the most serious problem. And as a patient, it's quite likely you won't absorb or remember every

Mastering the 20-minute doctor's visit, or how to get the best treatment possible under managed care

treatment recommended."

In other words, be precise and concise. Example: "I'm here today to talk about chest pain, dry skin, occasional sleeplessness and a pain in my knee."

■ Don't be afraid to raise what might be a potentially frightening or serious issue ... chest pain for example. "Doctors have seen it all; you won't scare them," Liu said. "It's always better to address problems sooner rather than later and sometimes the origin is not as serious as you might initially think."

The worst thing a patient can do on their own behalf is mention something potentially serious as the doctor is walking out the door: 'Oh and by the way, doc.' " Liu explained.

"Every physician dreads that moment when they have their hand on the door and the patient says, 'oh, and by the way,'" Liu said.

Patients must be aware of the reality: Doctors are busy people. By sharing serious information at the last minute you increase your chances of being dismissed or receiving inferior treatment.

■ Using your top four concerns as a starting point, give your doctor the most complete information possible, more specifically, the four W's: what, when, where and why. "This information is critical for an accurate diagnosis," Liu said.

He gives the example of an emergency room patient he saw being



DR. DAVIS LIU

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Davis Liu, M.D.

treated for a kidney stone; the man had actually suffered a back fracture due to osteoporosis. "The patient told the doctor he was experiencing

a sharp pain that traveled from his back to his groin. Had the doctor asked a few more questions like 'When did it start?' or 'Does sitting

or standing relieve the pain?' or the patient volunteered a more complete history, this setback could have been avoided," Liu said. In this case, the pain started when the man flipped a mattress; and was relieved by lying down, both key pieces of information that could have contributed to a quicker and accurate diagnosis.

■ Make sure you leave the doctor's office with your key concerns addressed, and completely understanding his or her suggested treatment plan or response. Liu recalls a young patient who came to see him about breast pain. The origins of her problem were benign, but one month later, she was back in his office. "I asked her why she was there," Liu explained. The patient did not understand that she did not have breast cancer.

Liu suggests his patients use the DATE acronym to jog key information:

D for diagnosis, do you understand it?

A for additional testing — is any necessary?

T for treatment plan — do you need medication or exercise or both?

E for evaluation — do you need a follow-up appointment and when?

■ Be thorough in providing your physician with an accurate and detailed case history, in Liu's opinion one of the most important tools in a physician's arsenal. "In the case of the guy with the fractured back, a good case history would have been invaluable."

■ Liu's last and perhaps best words on the subject: "Be precise, concise and set your own agenda. Remember, doctors hear the same stories all day long. You'll grab your doctor's attention and greatly improve your chances of getting the best care possible by starting the conversation with your four key concerns."