

# 10 THINGS TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR DOCTOR

## PROMOTE AGING WITH DIGNITY AND INDEPENDENCE

Having regular conversations with your doctor is key to aging with dignity, independence, and choice. It is important that your doctor knows as much as possible about your current health situation. This way, if your health needs change over time, you and your doctor can tailor your care to help you live safe and well. The best way to start these conversations is to ask questions. Your doctor has a responsibility to provide you with answers in a way that you can understand. Be sure to write your questions down before your doctor's visit and take them with you. You may want to invite a loved one to join you at the visit so that s/he can write down the doctor's answers while you listen.

Here are 10 important conversations to have with your doctor to prepare for changing health needs as you grow older.



1

### If you have Medicare, discuss scheduling an annual wellness visit with your doctor.

Medicare allows for a free wellness visit every year. During this wellness visit, you can talk about your overall health with your doctor and create a personalized plan based on your needs. If you have not had yours already, be sure you talk with your doctor about scheduling this annual wellness visit. For more information, visit the [Medicare Web site](#).

2

### Discuss your medications.

Keep a list of all the medications you take, including over-the-counter drugs (such as aspirin, cold medicine, or sleeping aids), herbal remedies, any vitamins or other supplements. Make sure a trusted loved one knows where you keep this list. Share a copy of this list with your doctor at each visit and consider bringing all of your medication bottles to your appointment as well.

If your doctor wants to prescribe something new, be sure to ask:

- Why is the new medication being prescribed?
- Does the new medication have side-effects, especially when combined with other medications I take?
- Are there any foods or activities that I should avoid with this new medication?
- Should I change any of my other medications when taking this new one?

If you and your doctor agree that the new medication is right for you, be sure to add it to your list of medications. If you want more information about any of your medications, your local pharmacist is also a great person to go to for help with the what, how, and why of your medication routine.

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### Discuss your daily activities.

Let your doctor know if you are able to do all of the things you need from day to day, or if you find yourself needing help with important tasks such as getting in and out of bed, preparing meals, bathing, or getting groceries. If you need help with one or more of these activities, it might be related to changes in your health. Your doctor can connect you with services or treatment to help meet these daily needs.



4

**Discuss ways to prevent falls.**

Falls are the leading cause of injuries to older adults. The three big risk factors for having a fall are:

- 1) Problems with your medication;
- 2) Problems with physical changes, including vision and balance; and
- 3) Things you may trip over in your home or community.

Talk with your doctor or pharmacist to see if any medication you are taking puts you at greater risk for a fall. You can also ask your doctor about vision screenings or an exam to measure walking and balance. If you have certain trip hazards in your home (loose carpets, throw rugs, pets underfoot, etc.), your doctor can connect you with community resources to help address these potential problems before a fall occurs.

5

**Discuss your appetite and healthy eating.**

If you find that your appetite has increased or decreased, or you are losing or gaining weight, tell your doctor and ask about ways to make sure you are receiving the right nutrition your body needs. Dietary needs and one's appetite can change with age. However, these changes can also mean that you may have other health conditions, such as diabetes, which will affect your nutritional needs and health going forward.

6

**Discuss your ability to concentrate and how you are feeling.**

We all have "moments of forgetfulness" from time to time. However if forgetting people, places, and things becomes more common, or if you often feel confused, tell your doctor as soon as possible. There may be an underlying health reason if it is occurring frequently.

Also, everyone experiences different moods from time to time, including occasional sadness and grief. Yet if you feel more anxious or upset than usual, find it hard to concentrate, or have significant changes in your sleeping habits for more than two weeks, be sure to tell your doctor about these signs as well.

7

**Discuss possible specialty care for ongoing health conditions.**

If you have an ongoing health condition that is affecting your daily life (such as diabetes or arthritis), talk with your doctor about a specialist or specialty services that may help. If you and your doctor decide this is the right course to take, make sure that the specialist keeps your regular doctor informed of any changes to your medications or treatment for this health condition.



8

**If you are in the hospital...**

If you find yourself in the hospital unexpectedly, make sure that the hospital care team keeps your regular doctor informed about your care and plans for returning home. Be sure to ask the following questions when planning to leave the hospital:

- Will I need any follow up care? If I need follow up care, what, when, with whom, and how often will I need this care?
- Will my medication change when I leave? If so, how and what should I take/not take going forward?
- Are there any warning signs I should watch out for when returning home, and what should I do if these occur?



9

**Discuss your health care preferences and choices in case you cannot make decisions for yourself.**

It is important for your doctor to know about your care preferences, so that s/he can work with you to create the best plan for your health and well-being if you lose the ability to make decisions on your own behalf. If you have filled out a legal document known as a **Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare Decisions** that designates another person to make health care decisions on your behalf, make sure your doctor has a copy. If you have created a living will (also known as an advance directive) that describes your wishes regarding the care you desire if you cannot communicate these decisions, make sure your doctor has a copy of this as well. One tool to create this list of preferences is the **Five Wishes** form, which can help you clarify your wishes and communicate them to medical professionals so these can be honored appropriately.

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**Discuss services in your community that may help.**

Most communities have services to help people with needs manage health conditions and get the help they need to live (see our companion guide, **10 Resources to Help Prepare for Aging with Dignity and Independence**). Your doctor may know about classes or community programs that help people with specific health conditions, such as diabetes management or cancer support groups. Your doctor may also have staff who is knowledgeable about the range of services in your community, so your doctor should be aware of what your current needs are to stay well and live actively.

Consider starting these conversations at your next doctor's visit and be sure to keep your doctor updated as changes to your health occur. These discussions are important to ensuring you receive the kind of care that is specific to your unique needs no matter your age.

This publication is one in a series produced by The SCAN Foundation titled "Ten Things You Should Know," designed to help you prepare to age with dignity and independence. To view the whole series, including Spanish versions, please visit [www.TheSCANFoundation.org](http://www.TheSCANFoundation.org).

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