

It's Okay to Ask

Your Health Is Important



Your health is important and you are one of the most important members of your health care team. That's why it's okay to ask your team for the information you need to stay as healthy and safe as you can.

Your doctor, nurse, pharmacist, and other care providers count on you to tell them about your health because you know your body best. They want to help you understand your health problems and what you need to do to get better and stay healthy.

Yet most of us find medical terms, explanations or instructions confusing. That's why it's okay to keep asking questions until you understand. The more you understand, the better prepared you'll be to make decisions and follow the treatment plan you and your health care providers agree will work for you.

Read on and worry less. There are simple things you can do to get the information you need to play an active part in your own health care.

Patients Who Ask

Patients who ask more questions get more information. Many different professionals will be on your health care team over your lifetime — among them, doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, dietitians, pharmacists and lab technicians. And there's one thing they all agree on: **patients who ask the most questions get the most information.** Knowledge makes the difference between concern and confidence... knowledge provides the reasons for your medication or treatment... knowledge gives you the reassurance you need to recover. So always remember that **It's Okay to Ask.**



What's Inside

| | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tips for Talking to Your Health Care Team..... | 2 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Take the Lead..... | 3 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Symptom Tracker..... | 4 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Top 5 Questions to Ask Your Health Care Provider..... | 4 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Questions to Ask about Your Treatment Choices..... | 4 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Time Well Spent..... | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lifestyle Changes..... | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Getting the Most out of Your Medication..... | 6 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> It's Okay to Ask Your Pharmacist..... | 6 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Team Up with Your Pharmacist..... | 7 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> About the HQCA..... | 8 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> We Want to Hear from You..... | 8 |

Stay Healthier, Live Longer

We all know eating well and exercising are important to staying healthy. Studies confirm that when you play an active part in your health care you stay healthier, recover sooner from illness, and live a longer, healthier life.

While some people visit their doctor or health care team with a specific concern, others may go just for a check up or advice. No matter why you're going, here's what you can do to make the most of that visit:

- Schedule regular visits with your health care providers.
- Plan ahead to get the most out of those visits.
- Learn about your conditions and medications.
- Follow through on treatments and lifestyle changes you agreed to with your doctor or other health care providers.

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| | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> What to Ask about New Medications | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My Medication List | |



It's Okay to Ask

Tips for Talking to Your Health Care Team

Here are some easy ways to make the most of your time with your health care team. Things you can do before, during and after your visit. Information to take with you about your medications and any symptoms you're experiencing as well as important questions to ask about any health conditions you may have.

Before Your Visit

Write a list of your questions, symptoms and concerns.

Often, we get to the office of our health care provider and forget what we wanted to ask.

That's why writing a list of questions, symptoms and concerns ahead of time helps. When you're done, number the most important things.

Use the **Symptom Tracker** and **Top 5 Questions to Ask Your Health Care Provider** on page 4 of this report as guides.

List all your medications.

Take along an up-to-date list of the prescription and non-prescription medications you use including things such as vitamins and herbal remedies.

Your health care provider needs to know everything you are taking. Having a list makes it easy for you to remember and for your provider to review.

Ask a family member or friend to go with you.

Sometimes you may want another set of eyes and ears. Asking someone you trust to go with you can be useful. Your companion can help you with questions, write down instructions and remember explanations.

If you do go alone, ask if it's okay to record the session. Most health care providers will agree but be sure to ask first.



During Your Visit

Tell your health care provider what you want to talk about and give them your list of medications.

Use your list of questions, symptoms and concerns to tell your health care provider what you want to discuss. Explain what concerns you most. If your list is long, you may need to plan together how best to handle things – maybe make another appointment to cover everything or follow up.

Discuss the different ways of handling your health problems.

Make sure you understand the good things and bad things about your treatment choices. Take the time you need to understand your options.

See **Questions to Ask about Your Treatment Choices** on page 4 of this publication.

Ask for materials about your condition, medication or any treatment choices.

Most health care providers will have information about your medical condition, your medication or the important choices you need to make about your treatment. Ask them for it. If it's not handy, they should be able to tell you how to get it. You'll know you're getting information they think is accurate and reliable.



During Your Visit (cont.)

Write down or record instructions and information you're given before you leave the office.

Studies show even when we feel we understand our health care providers' instructions during our visit, there's a good chance it may not all make sense by the time we get home.

Suggestion: write down instructions and information immediately — or record it (with your provider's permission) so you can go over it later when you've taken in more of the information.

Repeat your instructions and practice what your health care provider showed you in front of them.

It's a simple way to make sure you understand — whether learning more about your condition or understanding instructions and new equipment.

Have your doctor listen while you explain in your own words what you need to do and why.

Show the home care nurse how you will operate the oxygen tank you need for your recovery.

Repeat back to your pharmacist the instructions for taking your medicine. Then you'll both know you understand what needs to be done.

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After Your Visit

Follow up.

If you need tests, make appointments at the lab or other offices to get them done. Find out how your provider handles getting you information about test results and how long it will take. Some doctors only call or schedule an appointment if further follow up is needed. What's important to know is what to expect so you can follow up.

Call back.

Don't hesitate to call your health care provider if:

- You have questions.
- Your symptoms get worse.
- You have problems with your medicine.
- Your doctor's policy is to call you back with test results or to schedule an appointment to talk about them and you haven't heard back in the time agreed upon.

Take the Lead Make sure you understand

If you don't understand what your health care provider is telling you, let them know right away. Be open and honest. You could say: *This is new to me, would you mind explaining it again using simpler language? Or: Can you show me a picture or model to help me understand?*

Medical terms are a foreign language to most of us. So there's no need to feel embarrassed if you have trouble understanding your doctor or health care provider.

It's okay to ask for explanations and professionals are happy to give them — because the important thing is to give you the information you need to protect your health and well-being.



Be open. Be honest. Get well.

Embarrassed about a condition you think might be caused by your medication?

Don't want to bother your doctor with the little complications you've noticed after your treatment because you hope time is all that's needed?

The worst thing you can do is to lie to yourself. If you think your constipation, your tendency to bleed, your problem with your private parts, your inability to sleep, and so on, is caused by your medication or treatment, it's up to you to say so.

Medical professionals deal with the human body every day. And they live in human bodies of their own — so there's no need to be shy, hesitant or embarrassed.

It's Okay to Ask

Symptom Tracker

Not feeling well? Notice a change that seems unusual? Write down the answers to these simple questions before you see your health care provider and take them to your next appointment. Then you won't worry about remembering and your health care provider will get the information they need to help you.

What in your body feels bad or what in your body seems different?

When did it start?

What time of day does it happen?

How long does it last?

How often does it happen?

If you have pain, describe it. Is it sharp, dull, shooting, aching?

Is there anything that makes you feel worse or better?

Is there anything you can't do because of how you feel?

Top 5 Questions to Ask Your Health Care Provider

1. What is my health problem? (spell any new terms)

2. What do I need to do?

3. Why do I need to do this?

4. What can I expect?

5. Who do I call if I need help?

Name

Tel

Questions to Ask about Your Treatment Choices



During our lifetime, we may need to decide between different treatments.

For example, Jack and his doctor needed to decide whether surgery or a physiotherapy program would work best for his back problem given his age, health condition, job and lifestyle.

Jack's doctor discussed the benefits and risks of his choices and sent him home with a pamphlet, an informational DVD and reliable web sites to check before making up his mind.

If you need to choose between treatment options, here are some important questions to get answered before you decide:

- 1. What are the benefits and risks of each choice?
- 2. What side effects may occur?
- 3. How long will the treatment take?
- 4. How likely is it that the treatment will work for me?
- 5. Are there any other choices?



Time Well Spent

We all value our time. Here are some tips to ensure you and your doctor consider your time together well spent.

Get the type of appointment you need

Tell the receptionist why you need an appointment. Is it a simple check up or do you have an urgent complaint or a problem with a chronic health condition? Doctors schedule differently for all three situations and like to prepare.

You may need more than one visit

More than one appointment may be needed if you have a lot to talk about. The receptionist may be able to suggest the best time to book a longer appointment. Both you and your doctor will get better information if you schedule enough time.

When you need more time

Let your doctor or health care provider know. If they have no time that day, maybe you can speak to a nurse or doctor’s assistant on staff. Or you could ask if you can call later to speak with the person you prefer.

First things first

Ask about your most important concern first — even if you find it embarrassing or hard to talk about. It’s best to start there rather than leave it until last and find yourself running out of time.

Two heads are better than one

Take a family member or friend along. They can help you make the best use of your time by listening carefully, writing down things you need to remember and talking about what you both learned.

Test results

When you and your doctor have decided that test results are needed before you meet again, check that they have arrived before you do. You can call the receptionist and ask if your doctor has seen them. This includes results that need to be sent from another doctor (maybe a specialist) to your own.

Missing information could be vital to your recovery

We’re told what frustrates doctors most about patients is what patients don’t tell them.

We may not want to mention things such as smoking, excessive drinking or the fact that we have mixed prescription and non-prescription medications.

We may want those caring for us to think well of us or maybe we just forgot.

Whatever the reason, the cost to our health could be high — because that missing information could be vital to getting better.

Your health care team needs to know all it can about what may be affecting you. You and you alone are the best source for this information.

It’s Okay to be straightforward from the start — because you’re being treated, not judged.

It’s Okay to call back if you neglected to mention something important because we all get embarrassed and we all make mistakes.

And It’s Okay to put yourself first so you get the best treatment possible.



Lifestyle Changes

Not all prescriptions health care providers give are for medicine. You could be advised to change your lifestyle by eating differently, losing weight, getting more exercise or stopping smoking.

If you are, it’s okay to ask:

- How will this change improve my health?
- What might happen if I don’t make this change?
- What foods shouldn’t I eat? What foods should I eat?
- How much weight do I need to lose? How long should that weight loss take?
- What type of activity would be best for me and how long should I do it?
- Are there medications that could help me stop smoking?
- Could you suggest any support groups to help me?
- Do you have information that would help me?



It's Okay to Ask

Getting the Most out of Your Medication

Used properly, medications can ease your health problem, improve your general condition, and even save your life. Unfortunately, mistakes with medications were the second most common error reported in a 2006 patient safety survey done by the Health Quality Council of Alberta. So we need to get better at using our medications, monitoring them, and ensuring they are up-to-date.



Whether for you or a family member, this simple checklist will ensure that you're getting the full benefit from your prescribed medications.

- Read the label on the package every time.
 - Follow directions carefully. If you don't understand them, ask the pharmacist before you leave the store or call the pharmacy phone number on the prescription label.
 - Take only your own medicines.
 - Know your medicines. If you take more than one, be able to tell them apart by size, shape or colour.
-
- Get professional advice before you mix prescription or non-prescription medications, vitamins, supplements or herbal products.
 - Tell your health care provider about:
 - your allergies – don't forget any new ones.
 - reactions you've had to medications.
 - Let your pharmacist, doctor or other health care provider know if you don't feel well after taking a prescription or non-prescription medicine.
 - Get help right away if you think you're experiencing side effects or having a reaction to your medications.
 - Ask your health care provider if it's safe to drink alcohol or drive with your medicine.
 - Keep an up-to-date record of all the medicine you take including prescription and non-prescription medicines, dietary supplements such as vitamins, and herbal remedies.
 - Share your medication list with your health care providers each time you visit. See the insert for tips on how to prepare this list.
 - Take out-of-date or unused medicines to your pharmacy for safe disposal.

Side effects are things medications might cause besides what they are supposed to do. Before you take any medication, your doctor and pharmacist should tell you about possible side effects and how long they might last. Your doctor may want to change the medication if the side effects bother you. There might be another medication that suits you better. Ask your doctor which side effects you should report.



It's Okay to Ask Your Pharmacist

Ask your pharmacist any questions you have about your prescription or non-prescription medications. They are experts. If you use one pharmacy for all your prescriptions, your pharmacist can look at your complete personal drug history to keep track of the medicines you take.

Need Help with Your Medication?

Start by calling your pharmacist.

When your pharmacist isn't available call:

The Alberta Medication Line

1.888.944.1012

toll free in Alberta

VOIP users, please dial direct at 403.944.1012

Call if:

- You need help understanding your medications.
- You have questions about medications or herbal preparations.
- You want help making more informed and safe decisions about medications.
- You think you may be having side effects.
- You are pregnant or breastfeeding and have questions about the safety of medicines or herbal products on your baby.

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Team Up with Your Pharmacist

- Your pharmacist can help you get the most out of your medication by sharing important information about what it does and how to use it.
- Your pharmacist can help you stay safe by telling you which activities, foods, prescription and non-prescription medications, and herbal remedies to avoid mixing with your particular medications.
- Your pharmacist can help you come up with a system for your medications that will help you remember to take your medications and to take them at the right time.
- Your pharmacist can tell you about special packaging that will work for you.



- Ask your pharmacist about medication reminder devices such as calendars, mini-alarms or blister packs.
 - For people who take several medications, pill boxes with various compartments can help.
 - You can also ask for pre-filled pill boxes or request bottles without childproof lids.
- Your pharmacist can print large and/or flat labels to make your prescription instructions easier to read.
 - Make sure to ask your pharmacist any questions you have about your prescription and/or non-prescription medications.



Albert lives alone. He had several prescriptions to take at different times during the day. But his arthritis had gotten worse and he struggled twisting the caps off his pill containers. He went to the pharmacy where he filled all his prescriptions and the pharmacist came up with a solution.

Albert now uses pre-filled pill boxes that the pharmacy delivers. He has no trouble opening them or keeping track of what he’s taken. He also took the pharmacist’s suggestion and switched one of his pills to a capsule, which he finds much easier to swallow.

Packaging can help

Blister Pack

A **blister pack** is a special method of packing medications, where each dose is placed in a small plastic bubble and backed by a sheet of foil. Medications are organized by day, usually for up to a week at a time. When it is time to take the medication, you simply push the pill through the blister packing. That way, you can see which doses you’ve taken.

Dosette

A **dosette** is a container where you can store and organize your medications into compartments for different times of the day (e.g., morning, noon, afternoon or bedtime) usually for up to a week at a time. That way, you can see whether you have taken your last dose of medication. You can fill it yourself or have it filled by a pharmacist, which is a good idea if you take many medications at different times of the day. Dosettes may also come with alarms that beep when it is time for your next dose.

Non-childproof Lids

Most medications are put in childproof containers. Childproof lids can be very difficult to open. If you are having trouble, ask your pharmacist for **non-childproof lids**. Remember to always keep medications away from children.

Adverse reactions are more serious than side effects but happen less often. Adverse drug reactions are always unwanted and usually very harmful.

Examples include:

- A severe allergic reaction with difficulty breathing, skin rash, itching or swelling.
- Feeling faint and having a racing heart.
- Feeling sick to your stomach and throwing up or severe diarrhea.
- Depression to the point of considering suicide.

If you think you are having an adverse drug reaction, contact your doctor or pharmacist right away.

About the HQCA

As an independent organization legislated under the *Regional Health Authorities Act*, the Health Quality Council of Alberta gathers and analyzes information and collaborates with Alberta Health Services, health professions, Alberta Health and Wellness and academia to translate that knowledge into practical improvements to the quality and safety of the health care Albertans receive.



We Want to Hear from You

Please take a moment to answer these questions. You can also answer online at www.hqca.ca.

1. How did you get your copy of this report?

2. Did you find the information in the report useful? ☐ Yes ☐ No

3. How could we improve our next report?

4. What other topics would you like us to cover in our next report?

5. Did you use the pull out section in the report? ☐ Yes ☐ No

6. Other comments?

Fax, Mail, Email, Online

Fax comments to: 403.297.8258 **Mail to:** Health Quality Council of Alberta, 210, 811–14 Street NW, Calgary, AB T2N 2A4
Email to: info@hqca.ca **Answer online at** www.hqca.ca
Thank you for sending us your feedback.

More copies

For more copies of this report go to www.hqca.ca or call our office at 403.297.8162.

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Disclaimer: The health and medical information in this publication is not intended to take the place of advice or treatment from health care professionals. It is also not intended to substitute for the users’ relationships with their own health care providers.

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