



How to Get Your Doctor to Actually Listen

A patient advocacy cheat sheet.

Research shows doctors interrupt patients after an average of 11–23 seconds. This isn't a personal failure — it's a systemic problem. Here's how to use your 15 minutes.

Before the Appointment

- **Write down your top 2–3 concerns only.** You won't get to everything. Prioritize the most important or scary one first.
- **Track symptoms specifically:** when they happen, how long they last, what makes them better or worse. Vague is easy to dismiss; specific is hard to ignore.
- **List all medications, supplements, and vitamins** you're currently taking, including doses.
- **Use the patient portal** to send your agenda ahead of time if you can — it primes the appointment.
- **Bring someone with you.** A trusted person can take notes, remember details you miss, and speak up for you. This isn't weakness — it's smart.

During the Appointment: Scripts That Work

Set the agenda at the start:

"Before we dive in, I have [two/three] concerns I want to cover today. Can I list them quickly?"

If you feel rushed or interrupted:

"I'll get to that — I just want to finish this thought first."

"Can we slow down so I can make sure I understand what you're telling me?"

If your concerns are being dismissed:

"I understand that could be a factor. I'd also like to rule out other causes — what test would help clarify this?"

"I know my body, and this feels different. I really need your help figuring out what's going on."

When you want to push for more information:

"What serious conditions have we ruled in or out?"

"If my tests come back normal but I still have symptoms, what's our next step?"

Asking for a Second Opinion

Most doctors expect and support second opinions — they're a normal part of good medicine. If a doctor gets defensive or dismissive, that itself is a red flag.



"I appreciate your input. To feel confident moving forward, I'd like to get a second opinion. Who would you recommend?"

Red Flags — When It's Not You, It's Your Doctor

You're not being difficult. These are signs it may be time to find a new provider:

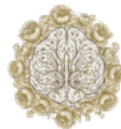
- Blaming all symptoms on stress, anxiety, or weight without investigation
- Getting defensive when you ask questions or request a second opinion
- Saying you "don't look sick enough" to have a real concern
- Refusing further testing when your symptoms persist or worsen
- Making you feel irrational, dramatic, or difficult for advocating for yourself

A note on health literacy: Research shows that even college-educated adults often struggle to understand medical jargon under stress. It is always okay to say: "I'm not familiar with that term — can you explain it in plain language?" A good doctor will never make you feel embarrassed for asking.

Sources

- Harvard Health: health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/what-to-do-about-medical-gaslighting
- AHRQ (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality): ahrq.gov/health-literacy
- Singh et al. (2019), Journal of General Internal Medicine — physician interruption study
- Healthline: healthline.com/health/how-to-advocate-for-yourself-at-the-doctor
- U.S. News & World Report: health.usnews.com (how to talk so your doctor will listen)

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