

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF AN APPOINTMENT WITH YOUR DOCTOR/CONSULTANT

As the authors of 'Doctors Talking with Patients/Patients Talking with Doctors' write, 'Encounters with doctors are highly charged - often comforting and rewarding, sometimes upsetting and disappointing.' This is particularly true if you've booked an appointment because you think your periods have ceased or changed and you suspect you may have a diagnosis of premature ovarian insufficiency (POI). You may feel emotional or angry ('Why does this have to happen to me?') or sad ('How could my body let me down like this?') or embarrassed ('What if I've imagined it all?').

Whatever your attitude, it's important to approach your initial consultation (whether it's with your family GP or a specialist) with some idea of the questions that you'd like answered. Some people find it helpful to write their questions down beforehand since doctors' consulting rooms can be very intimidating places. Or perhaps you could take your partner, or mother or a friend with you to give you confidence. Comparing notes afterwards and assessing whether or not you've gathered the same information can be most illuminating. 'Doctors Talking with Patients' also states that patients who are more verbally active during their visit to the doctor by offering explanations or thoughts about their condition, asking questions or expressing doubts are treated differently to patients who are less active. You may find some of the questions listed below useful in thinking through your condition (or suspected condition) and focusing your mind on what you really need from your doctor and how you want to approach your appointment.

Check list

1. Write down some questions before you go or a list of what is troubling you or changes you have noticed.
2. Make a note of anything in your own or family history that may be relevant, including dates, ages etc.
3. Take a pen and paper to write down the answers.
4. Take your partner, your mum or a friend along

In your dealings with your doctor you have the right to:

Confidentiality

Be treated with dignity

Be informed

Obtain another opinion

Have access to your medical records

Have a competent, caring and communicative doctor

Your responsibilities:

To be punctual for your appointment

To be honest and frank about your condition, however embarrassing

Report changes in your condition

Treat your doctor and the staff courteously

To think about what you have to get across to your doctor before the appointment, write it down if necessary.

To tell the doctor if you don't understand something

To follow the advice given

To have reasonable expectations. Your GP can't put you at the top of an egg donation waiting list or make your ovaries work again.

Questions to ask on first being diagnosed with POI

- How long do I have to wait before realising that my periods won't start again?
- How can I tell whether they have started again if I'm on HRT or the Pill?
- Should I come off it every so often to check? If so, how long should I come off it for?
- What are the effects of POI in the long and short-term?
- What sort of treatment is available?
- Does it have any drawbacks?
- Are there any alternatives?
- What options are available to me if I want a child?
- Can you refer me to a specialist menopause clinic or an endocrinology clinic?

Questions to ask your doctor about POI in general

Background

- Can you explain to me why this has happened?
- See if you can find out more about potential causes, for example whether it is genetically related or due to other factors.

Symptoms

- What effect is the sudden reduction in ovarian hormones likely to have upon my body?
- Discuss with your doctor whether you might be able to come up with a health plan together to help you deal with the physical changes. Make sure you impress upon your doctor that you are not prepared just to 'put up with' unpleasant symptoms but wish to do all that you can to maintain your quality of life. It's up to you at this point to decide what's really important to you and to make this clear to your doctor so that they can help you in the best way possible.
- If you have already noticed certain symptoms, describe them as accurately as you can, however small, trivial or embarrassing they may seem.
- Ask the doctor if they have read about anything that might help and tell them if you have found something which has been useful for you. Your experience may help someone else and we'd be interested to hear about it at The Daisy Network too.

Osteoporosis (see also The Daisy Network fact sheet on Osteoporosis)

- How likely am I to develop osteoporosis?
- It's a good idea to evaluate your risk factors with your doctor, looking in particular at your build, your diet, your exercise regime and your family history.
- What can be done to lower my risk?
- Will HRT help?

- What else should I do?
- Ask about lifestyle changes, diet, exercise, quitting smoking and how best to cope with stress.
- If you struggle with these changes, ask whether the doctor can refer you to someone who might be able to help (such as a counsellor or hypnotherapist).
- Will any other medication I'm taking affect my bone density?
- Check whether you should change your medication (if possible) and, if you don't or can't, make sure your bone density is monitored closely.
- Can you refer me for a bone density test (DEXA)?
- If this is not possible on the NHS, find out about arranging one privately (the cost is usually less than £100).
- What will the follow-up to a bone density test be?
- If my bones have lost a lot of density, will you prescribe any medication?

Heart disease

- How likely am I to develop heart disease?
- Evaluate your risk factors with your doctor, taking into consideration your family history, your diet, your exercise regime and your build.
- Do I need a health screening to test my levels of cholesterol (HDL and LDL), triglycerides, blood sugar and blood pressure?
- What medical treatment is available to me? Ask about HRT, SERMs and aspirin.
- What changes should I make to my lifestyle i.e. diet, exercise, bad habits?

Supplements

- Are there any supplements that you recommend me to take and are there any that I should NOT take?
- In particular, you might want to discuss taking Vitamin D and calcium (possibly as calcium carbonate or calcium citrate).
- Will these supplements interact in any way with my prescribed medicine, thereby reducing its benefit or having a detrimental effect?
- You should also be sure to tell the doctor which supplements you already take.