

Your Doctor Said

WHAT?

Dr. Terrie Wurzbacher

Exposing The Communication Gap



Doctor-Patient Communication
“Your Symptom Diary”

Dr. Terrie Wurzbacher

It's important to keep a diary or journal of your symptoms. Why? So that you can give an accurate description of your problem when you finally get an appointment. “Oh, but, of course I'll remember what's bothering me.” Not necessarily. It depends on a number of factors.

First, it depends on how much your symptoms change. Often, you won't be able to remember what the initial symptoms were if they've changed over a period of time.

Next, your memory may vary if you wait a long time before making an appointment. Not that this is a bad thing. Depending on how long it takes you to make this decision it may be difficult to remember when you first started having problems and perhaps even what the symptoms were then. Often, it's something that you don't even pay much attention to. It's when the problem persists that you decide that you might need to see the doctor.

The time to start keeping track of these symptoms is as soon as they really seem to be persisting. This may be even before you decide you'll need to see the doc. Why would you want to track them when you're not even sure you need to see the doctor? Well, because you can always throw the paper away or delete the computer file; but it would be wise to save it. Hopefully, they will go away and never return. But if they don't go away or if they return, then it's important to for the doctor to know things like: how long the symptoms have been there, how they have progressed or changed, how many times you've experienced them etc.

It also might take a long time to get an appointment once you decide you need to make one. If it's another few weeks before you see the doctor, you might not remember everything.

So, what do you track? When did the symptoms started? What were they like initially? Did they change? If they changed, how – did they get worse or better? Did the location of the pain/cramps/discomfort/etc change? If so, from where to where? Were there any associated symptoms like nausea/vomiting/diarrhea/constipation for any gastrointestinal complaints? What seemed to bring on the symptoms? What makes them worse? Have you lost any weight? How has your appetite been? Did you have a fever? Have you had any travel before this started? Has anyone you've been around been sick? How have your daily activities been affected? What about your sleep – has that been impacted?

Write down anything that you can think of. Write about your bowels as embarrassing as that may be – pay attention to their frequency, consistency, color...believe it or not, all of these are important to the doctor and they are things he'll ask about but not to increase any shame but to find out how your gastrointestinal tract is working. Write about your appetite – is it the same as before you got to feeling bad? Is it worse? Write about foods and how they have (or have not) affected you. Do they keep you from doing anything – like daily activities or sleeping? Can you think of anything that's associated with them? Write down anything you can think of.

If you have headaches or weakness or numbness somewhere, write about how these symptoms started – suddenly or gradually? When, how long ago, what were you doing? Were there any associated symptoms – any visual problems, dizziness, trouble walking, trouble with either arm or leg? Have you ever had these symptoms before? If so, how does this time compare? Write down anything that's out of the ordinary. Write down things you think may be associated whether or not they really are is not important. If you think something may be connected, write it down.

Keep recording as long as the symptoms occur. If they are intermittent or recurrent, track what you were doing that day or what you had to eat or how much sleep you had. Write down the days you felt fine. Write down the days you didn't feel fine.

Most importantly – take this with you when you go to the doctor (again – make it legible) and tell the people who check you in that you've got it. If they don't take it, tell the doctor when he first comes in.

You'll be very glad you did this. If you want more information on what to record, contact the author at Terrie@askyourdoctorsaidwhat.com

Dr. Wurzbacher is a retired Navy Emergency Medicine Physician who recognized about early in her career that she wasn't good at communication and more importantly that she was probably missing much of what her patients were trying to tell her. Although she was excellent at diagnosing conditions, patients generally need more than that. The Emergency Department is one (of many) places that being good at communication is essential since you have no records to work with and a short amount of time to glean information and make a diagnosis. So, she worked diligently at learning to really HEAR what her patients were telling her. Teaching young doctors and ancillary staff the personal aspects of medicine has become a passion of hers. Her book, *“Your Doctor Said What”* is intended to help patients not only understand why many doctors seem like aliens but also how to empower themselves to deal with them.

Check her out at <http://www.yourdoctorsaidwhat.com> and <http://www.yourdoctorsaidwhatblog.com> .

