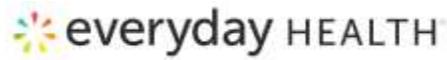


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10 Ways to Prepare for a Knee Osteoarthritis Checkup

The steps you take before your appointment can help improve your condition long after you leave the doctor's office.

By Beth W. Orenstein



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Most doctors' offices schedule the appointments 15 to 20 minutes apart, according to the Arnold P. Gold Foundation, which means you don't have much time with your physician before he or she has to move on to someone else. And when you're looking for ways to reduce the pain from knee osteoarthritis, it's important to make the most out of every minute. Here's how to prepare for your appointment:

Prioritize your concerns. Make a list of what you want to discuss about your osteoarthritis treatment, and list the most important concerns first, the Arthritis Foundation suggests. You can also share your written list with your doctor so he or she can be sure to address your top concerns.

Bring a list of your symptoms and when they occur. "It is really helpful to know exactly what the problem is," says David G. Borenstein, MD, a rheumatologist at Arthritis and Rheumatism Associates and a clinical professor of medicine at The George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Be specific: "Is it a particular part of the knee that is most painful?"

Are there things that make it better or worse? Is it red and swollen at the beginning of the day? Is it worse at the end of the day?" All of this information can help you and your doctor devise the best treatment plan, Dr. Borenstein says.

Bring a list of your medications and supplements. "It is very helpful to know what you have tried to improve your knee pain — whether that's over-the-counter or prescription drugs," Borenstein says. Provide the dose and how often you take each medication. Your list should also include herbs or supplements and any medications that you have been prescribed for other health conditions. This is important because medications and supplements may interact with each other, the American Academy of Family Physicians says.

Be honest. If you aren't taking the medication that your doctor prescribed, fess up, Borenstein says. The same goes for if you aren't doing the exercises your physical therapist showed you. "You need to be honest about what you have and haven't done so we know what's working and what isn't — and what isn't working because you haven't given it a chance," he says.

Take notes. Notes will help you remember what your doctor said about your treatment, and they also assure that the conversation continues from visit to visit, says Theresa Lawrence-Ford, MD, medical director of North Georgia Rheumatology Group and a rheumatologist at Gwinnett Medical Center Hospitals in Lawrenceville, Georgia.

Speak up. If you don't understand what your doctor is telling you, say so, says Dr. Lawrence-Ford. She recommends using a phrase like, "I'm not clear with what you described to me. Can you go over it again slowly, or use more layman's terms?" If your doctor can't do that, you may need to find another provider. "I always ask my patients if I have been clear and if they understand what I've said. Patients should never leave the office without full clarity," she says.

Do your homework. Research knee osteoarthritis on reliable websites, such as those of the American College of Rheumatology and the Arthritis Foundation, Lawrence-Ford says. Having that background information will be helpful when you discuss your knee osteoarthritis, she says. Borenstein adds that he's more than happy to discuss treatments and other information that patients have found online as long as they keep an open mind. "You're coming here for my opinion," he says. "If you formed all your opinions already, it's not very useful to your situation."

Bring an ally with you. Ask a friend or family member to tag along, the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons suggests. This person can act as your second set of ears and help you remember all of the information your doctor provides. If language is an issue, choose an adult friend or family member who can translate for you.

Ask what to expect from your treatment. You and your doctor may set goals during your first visit. Lawrence-Ford says it's reasonable for you to ask: "If I do what you tell me, when will I feel better? Next month? In three months? In six months? And what if I don't feel better in that time?" Ask about specifics, too: If your doctor tells you that losing weight will help your knee pain, ask how much you should lose and ask for help if you need it. "You will get much better results if there is a clear path to reaching your goals," she says.

Request printed information. Your doctor will probably have helpful handouts or brochures that you can read when you get home, but you can also ask where to find information online. Physician assistants or nurse practitioners on your healthcare team can address any remaining questions or concerns before you leave the office.