



This document is part of California's Valued Trust (CVT) educational series

## **Be Informed. Be Involved.**

*Know your health care choices.*

This informational series is a resource to help you get good quality health care. For more resources, visit our Web site at [www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved](http://www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved).

### **1 For advice right away, call the medical "help line" at your health plan or doctor's office**

Using a phone "help line" is a quick and easy way to get advice and information.

- Sometimes appointments are really needed and other times you might be able to manage your health problem at home. Talking with the advice nurse can help you decide whether you need to come in for care and how soon you need to be seen.
  - If you need to come in for an appointment, ask what you should do for your health problem until you are able to be seen.
  - If you don't need to come in, you can get advice over the phone on how to handle your problem and what symptoms to watch for. This can save you a lot of time and trouble.
- Advice nurses are knowledgeable and patient. Talking with an advice nurse can be good opportunity to have an in-depth discussion about the details of your care.

### **2 Find information to help understand your health condition, symptoms, or treatment choices**

To get good quality care, you need to be informed and involved in health care decision making. Sometimes, you already know what illness or medical condition you have before you go in for an appointment. Other times, you might only know what symptoms

you are having. Either way, it can often be helpful to gather some information before you go in to see your doctor or other health professional.

### What kinds of information?

Look for information that helps you understand your health condition, the symptoms you are having, and the possible choices you may have about treatment. Sometimes you can find information that tells which types of tests and treatments tend to work the best and be the safest for particular conditions. This information comes from scientific medical research on what works best for patient care.



Look for these resources at CVT's Web site

[www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved](http://www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved).

“How do we know what types of health care work best?”

- “Information about health care quality: What it is and where to find it.”

### Where can you get health information?

- **Your doctor or other health professional.** You can ask for health information when you go in for an appointment.
- **Websites** can be a great source of health information – as long as you are careful about which websites you use. The information on some websites is not trustworthy.



These resources at CVT's Web site

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will help you pick websites with reliable and up-to-date information that is based on solid medical research:

- “Health information on the internet: A checklist to help you judge which websites to trust.”
  - A list of recommended websites that have trustworthy health information.”
- **Your health plan.** Call Member Services at your health plan and ask about the information resources they have available.
  - **Your public library.** You can find books and other materials with health information. In addition, most libraries offer free access to the internet. A librarian can help you search for the information you need.

## How can you use the information you find?

What you learn from gathering information can give you a better idea of what you and your doctor may need to talk about during your appointment. If you have gathered information from websites or other sources, you might want to take it along to your appointment and discuss it with your doctor or other health professional.

### 3 Make lists to take to your appointment (questions you want to ask, medications you take, etc.)

Making written lists can help you organize your thoughts and concerns and feel more confident about talking with your doctor or other health care provider. Take your lists with you to your visit. They are good reminders to help you cover everything that is important to you. **Here are four types of lists that many people find helpful:**

#### 1. A list of all the things you want to tell or show your doctor or other health care professional during your visit.

What you write on this list will vary depending on your health condition and the reasons for your medical visit. For example, it could include specific symptoms you've been having and when they started. If you have gathered health information on your own, you might want to take a copy with you to discuss during your visit.

#### 2. A list of the questions you want to ask during your visit.



For detailed advice on how and why to ask questions, see “**Questions are the answer**” at the website of the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality ([www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer/](http://www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer/)).

- It includes checklists of questions to ask in different situations, such as when you get a new prescription or when you are having tests or surgery.
- You can even customize and print your own list of questions to take with you to a medical visit.

#### 3. A list of all medications you are currently taking (prescription medicines, non-prescription medicines, vitamins, herbal remedies, and other supplements).

The single biggest “medical error” involves mistakes in medications. This can include giving patients a medicine they are allergic to or a medicine that does not work well with the other medicines the patient is taking. Medication mistakes can be serious.

To give you care that is safe and appropriate, your doctors and other health professionals need to know about *everything* you are currently taking. For your own safety, give them a written list:

- The list should include prescription medicines, vitamins and other supplements, herbal remedies, and any medicines that you buy without a prescription. Don't forget to include "over-the-counter" medications such as ibuprofen or aspirin.
- For each medication or supplement on your list, write down how much you take and how often you take it.
- For some people, it's easier to put all of their medications in a bag to take along to their appointment.

#### 4. **A list of your allergies** (including any bad reactions you have had to medications).

To make sure that any new medications or treatments are safe for you, your doctors and other health care providers need to know about all of your allergies, especially any allergies to medications.

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#### **Consider asking a friend or family member to go with you to your appointment**

Having a trusted friend or family member at your side can be a great help and comfort during your appointment, especially if you are having serious health problems or feeling uncertain or concerned.

- A friend or family member you trust can give you support when you need it most, especially if you are feeling confused or overwhelmed.
- A friend or family member can help you listen carefully, help you ask the right questions, and take notes for you.



CVT's Web site [www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved](http://www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved) has many other tip sheets to help you get good quality care, including the following:

- "Tips on what to do *during* your health care appointment."
- "Tips for following through on treatment and managing your health."

