

SPEAKING UP



AT THE DOCTOR

Words by Emma Nuttall

Taking control of your health involves having the courage to engage in honest, and sometimes difficult, conversations with your doctor. Here we take a look at how to move beyond the traditional doctor relationship and become empowered to advocate for yourself.



Are you proactive when it comes to your health? Do you have regular check-ups and monitor changes in how you feel? Are you comfortable discussing topics like sexual health and emotional well-being with your doctor? Or do you find yourself skipping appointments because you're too busy or too uncomfortable to bring up certain issues? Your relationship with your primary doctor is an important and sometimes overlooked element of your healthcare journey. However, people often hold back due to reluctance, embarrassment or self-neglect. Taking a holistic approach to your health, however, involves making time for yourself, building a good rapport with your doctor and being open to meaningful discussions about your health-related concerns.

Empowering yourself as a patient

Taking a holistic approach to your health means being an active participant in your health care decisions. If something is bothering you, or interfering with your daily life, it's important to prioritise yourself and make an appointment with your doctor. It can also be helpful to come prepared. Particularly when it involves complicated health issues. This gives you the confidence to ask questions so you can gain a good understanding of your condition. Then you are part of the decision-making process moving forward.

How much research is too much?

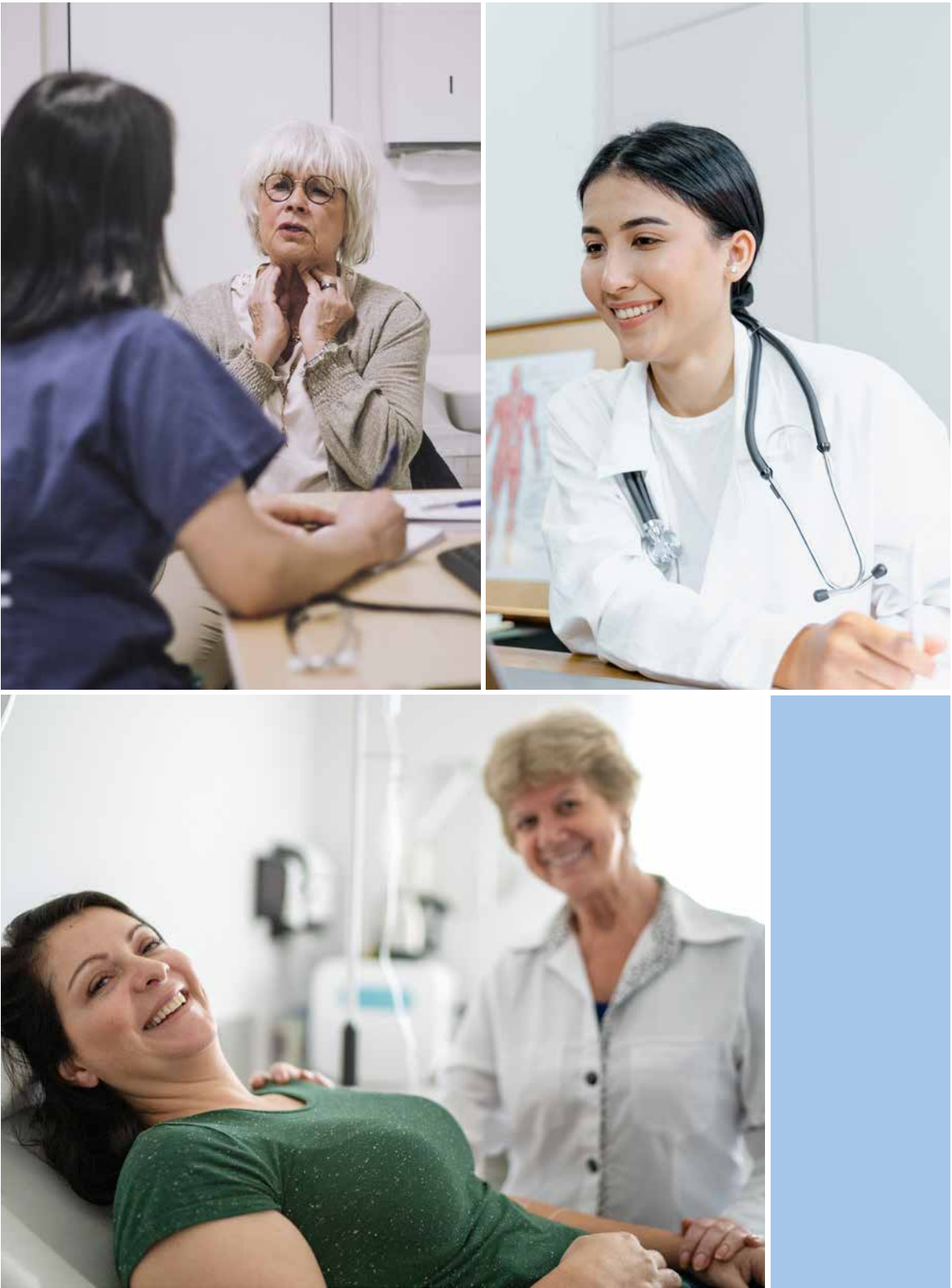
With the internet offering an overwhelming amount of medical information, finding the balance between being informed and over-researched can be challenging. Online medical content can lead to unnecessary anxiety and google can lead you down rabbit holes of misinformation. Taking health advice from unverified sources can result in misguided diagnoses and decisions, or worse, the adoption of dangerous trends.

Psychologist Carly Dober warns about these dangers. "People will pop their symptoms into Google, or search Instagram or TikTok content and diagnose their own conditions (often incorrectly) and engage in a treatment plan they've found online which can have quite serious consequences," she explains.

"With the barrier to entry being incredibly low for making content online, it's important to be discerning," Dober explains. "Often, people create emotionally persuasive content to grow their following, but much of the time, this information can be wrong. At its best, it's incorrect; at its worst, it can be fatal." Health advice should come from medical professionals or practitioners who are credentialed, licensed and educated in the relevant field.

Social media is rife with "healthwashing" – a form of deceptive marketing that promotes products as

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Images: Getty

being healthier than they are. Dober recommends turning instead to reputable national health organisations such as government health bodies or the World Health Organisation. Intentionally following these sources can also help ensure your algorithm is providing accurate, evidence-based information.

As people increase their levels of health literacy, they naturally begin to place greater importance on where health information has originated from and the research and data that supports it. Consider asking your doctor for guidance on where to find credible health advice. A simple request for recommended reading can lead you to reliable sources and empower you to make informed decisions about your health.

Instead of researching possible scenarios before your appointment, focus on preparing specific questions for your doctor, such as:

- What could be the cause of my symptoms?
- Are there lifestyle changes or preventative steps I should consider?
- Can you explain the significance of my blood test results?
- What are the risks, benefits and possible side effects of this treatment?
- Are there any alternative treatments or specialists I should consider seeing?

These questions are a starting point; supplement them with your own.

Approaching sensitive subjects

According to Dr Gillian Deakin, a Sydney-based general practitioner and the author of *What The Hell is Wrong with Me?*, an understanding of the patient's medical history and family history are required for the doctor to provide a high level of care. Past surgical procedures, medications and allergies along with an understanding of the patient's mental and sexual health are important to provide, and a relationship where trust has been built makes the process of sharing this information much easier.

Building trust with your doctor involves having courageous conversations and a clear and open line of communication. Many people feel hesitant bringing up sensitive issues during appointments, but this can hinder early detection and treatment of potentially serious health problems.

According to Dober, one of the best ways to approach these conversations is to remember the purpose of the appointment and the role of the health professional. "I remind people that while this is one appointment for them, the health professional may have up to 20 similar appointments that day, many of which are personal and difficult for the client to talk about," says Dober. While you may feel embarrassed or shy, you're not alone in this experience.

Deakin advises that if you feel uncomfortable bringing up certain topics, write your concerns down before the appointment. This ensures you cover everything you want to address without hesitation.

Dober agrees, "I encourage people to take in notes, either in written form or in their phone, about what their symptoms are, and what they would like to discuss. This way they don't leave the appointment without their concerns being communicated," she advises.

Role playing with close friends or family if you're unsure about how to raise a topic is another of Dober's suggestions. Consider bringing in a support person if you feel unable to have the conversation independently. "The vast majority of health professionals truly want to help you in the best way they can, and they will work with you in order to do so," assures Dober.

How important are regular check-ups?

Deakin recommends seeing your doctor annually, even if you're not unwell. "There are many things that need attention," she says, including vaccinations, cardiovascular checks and monitoring any hereditary risks based on your family history. Regular health checkups allow for early identification of potential conditions, such as cancer or cardiovascular issues that could be lifesaving.

During this health check, your doctor can assess your current health and recommend screening tests such as taking your blood pressure, ordering blood tests and performing a skin check. Early detection may allow for easier or more effective treatments of possible health issues.

When you need additional support

Receiving a new diagnosis can be overwhelming, and it might take several follow-up appointments to comprehend all the information. "It is important you become familiar with your condition, so persevere," Deakin advises. She also suggests finding out if there are patient support groups or a foundation dedicated to your condition so you can learn more about it and meet people in a similar position.

Deakin also advocates for bringing a trusted friend or family member to your consultation. Not only can they provide emotional support, but they also act as a second pair of ears to help recall what the doctor said, ensuring that critical details are absorbed and understood.

What if you feel like you're not being heard?

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you may feel that your doctor isn't fully addressing your concerns. This can be especially true for women, who can face

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challenges in having their symptoms taken seriously. Deakin acknowledges this as a real issue and advises women to present the facts of their symptoms without offering their own diagnosis. If your story is complicated, writing it down in a clear timeline is helpful – what the first symptom was, when it started, how severe it is and so on. Deakin also suggests being realistic about what the doctor can achieve in a standard consultation and if necessary, booking a longer appointment or returning for a follow-up.

It's natural to connect with some personalities and not others and this may also apply to your relationship with your medical practitioner. Just like in any personal or professional interaction, finding the right fit can make all the difference. General practitioners (GPs) in Australia are trained to provide broad-based medical care, but many have specialised areas of interest, such as women's health, mental health or chronic disease management. While they practice general medicine, some GPs see more patients in particular fields, allowing them to develop deeper expertise in those areas.

If you're looking for a GP with specific knowledge, like expertise in perimenopause or menopause, consider finding one who focuses on women's health. You can often find this information by looking up GPs online or calling the practice to inquire. To find a GP who specialises in menopause, a good place to start is the Australasian Menopause Society website: menopause.org.au. It's important to feel comfortable with your doctor because a trusting relationship encourages open communication. When you're at ease, you're more likely to ask questions, share your concerns, and engage in meaningful discussions about your treatment options. If your current GP isn't the right match, it's completely acceptable to switch and find someone who meets your needs.

How much can we expect from our GPs?

General practitioners are often your first point of contact for health concerns, but they can't specialise in every area of medicine. Deakin points out that GPs are trained to provide continuous, coordinated care, and part of this role includes referring patients to specialists when necessary. If you ever feel that your GP may not have the answers or the specialist knowledge needed for your condition, it's entirely appropriate to ask for a referral. A second opinion or specialist insight can enhance your care without devaluing your GP's role in your health journey.

This is also where multi-modality clinics can come into play. A multi-modality medicine clinic offers various types of healthcare professionals under one roof—GPs, physical therapists, dietitians and more. These clinics offer a holistic approach, addressing

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multiple aspects of your well-being. The advantage is that you receive a coordinated approach to your health, with all your healthcare providers collaborating for a more comprehensive treatment plan.

A focus on preventative health

Supporting your health and reducing the risk of certain conditions requires a proactive approach. One of the most important steps is making healthy lifestyle choices. This includes finding a form of physical activity you enjoy and incorporating it into your routine consistently. A balanced diet, high in vegetables, fruits and whole foods is crucial for maintaining long-term health. Equally important is ensuring you get sufficient, high-quality, restorative sleep, which allows your body to recover and function at its best. Actively managing and reducing stress should also be a focus given the number of stressors we encounter daily. The relationship with your doctor can play a role too as your doctor can help you identify potential symptoms before they become serious and explain the lifestyle choices that are most important for reducing hereditary risks.

Understanding blood tests

Blood tests are an important tool for monitoring overall health, as they contain physiological markers that can indicate early signs of disease. Regular testing helps detect conditions early and reveals patterns that may flag potential risks. By working with a healthcare professional to understand your results, you can take early action through lifestyle changes or targeted supplementation before more invasive treatments are necessary. Common markers to monitor include cholesterol levels, blood glucose, liver and kidney function, complete blood count and vitamin D levels.

Even in healthy individuals, regular blood tests can detect minor imbalances that might otherwise go unnoticed. Sometimes, results fall within the “normal” range but may still be suboptimal. Natural health practitioners such as Naturopaths and Nutritionists can help you understand your test results in detail and spend more time with you during appointments.

Blood tests can monitor several key areas of health: nutritional deficiencies that impact bone health, immunity and energy levels; inflammation markers like C-reactive protein (CRP) that indicate underlying health conditions; hormone imbalances affecting metabolism, mood and wellbeing; and thyroid function through TSH and comprehensive thyroid panels. By identifying these markers early, you can work with healthcare practitioners to address imbalances through diet and lifestyle changes before they develop into more serious conditions.

Ultimately, the first step in prioritising your health involves making time for yourself and taking an active role in your wellbeing. Just like any positive relationship, the connection with your medical practitioner is built on communication and trust. Be open and honest, and come prepared to discuss even sensitive issues. If you're uncomfortable with the care you're receiving or the outcome of your treatment, seeking a second opinion is not only appropriate but also part of taking a more empowered approach to your health. 🧠

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