



## THE DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU NOW

SCHEDULED YOUR ANNUAL CHECKUPS? HERE'S HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR DOCTORS' APPOINTMENTS AND WHAT BLACK WOMEN PHYSICIANS ENCOURAGE YOU TO ASK

BY GINA ROBERTS-GREY

**T**aking care of your physical, emotional and mental well-being requires a team effort with a common goal: ensuring you live a long, healthy life. You're the star athlete, running all the plays that help keep opponents like cancer, diabetes, heart disease and even the flu from scoring on you. Calling those plays is your coach, aka your doctor, who sees the big picture when it comes to the health game.

# HEALTHY & HAPPY



**MICHELE C. REED, D.O.**

"We're partners in preventing disease from developing or progressing," says Michele C. Reed, a family physician in Garden City, New York. Whether you're working with a general practitioner or a specialist, follow these expert tips on how to maximize your partnership so you can go the distance.

## ACT AS IF YOU'RE ON A FIRST DATE

You wouldn't head to a date without putting in a little preparation, right? Physicians suggest adopting that same attitude every time you see them by taking an active role in your health care.

"Familiarity with a doctor makes us comfortable," says cardiologist Jennifer H. Mieres, professor at Hofstra Northwell School of Medicine and chief diversity and inclusion officer at Northwell Health in Lake Success, New York. But it also opens the door to false assumptions and unrealistic expectations.

"It's easy to assume that if a doctor doesn't bring up something you talked about at the last visit, it's not worth discussing," says Mieres. "But part of your prep should be to jot down notes—either on your phone, tablet or paper—about what you've experienced since the last exam. If your doctor doesn't mention that colonoscopy or mammogram she's been trying to persuade you to get, don't think it's no longer a priority." Instead of waiting for your medical practitioner to ask how well controlled your asthma is, for example, start the conversation to make sure the matter is addressed.

## TIMING ISN'T EVERYTHING

As much as you wish there were, physicians report there's no magical method to shorten the time you'll sit in their waiting rooms. The first appointment of the day holds the most promise that you'll be seen on schedule. However, you never know when an emergency will pop up, says Renee Matthews, M.D., a women's health advocate and lecturer in Chicago. Since anything can throw off a doctor's day, she suggests

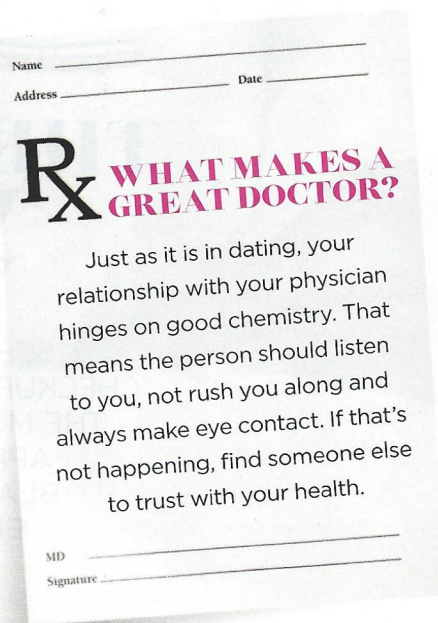
room, physicians typically go over a patient's background and the reason for the visit. "If I walk in expecting to address flulike symptoms or a sinus infection and am suddenly hit with, 'Oh, yeah, I've also been having chest pains or experiencing numbness,' I'm now spending a lot more time with that patient," says Reed.

Up-front honesty can avoid the snowball effect. "Being specific when you schedule an appointment ensures that a doctor allots the time needed for you and reduces frustration for other patients," says Reed.

## WE CAN'T READ YOUR MIND

Doctors can only treat—or prevent—issues they know they're dealing with. Fibbing or giving half the story prohibits you from receiving the most comprehensive individualized health playbook.

"So often I'll have patients tell me they haven't taken their prescribed medicine for a few days, but in reality it's been a few months or more," says Reed. This may lead physicians to think a treatment isn't working when, in fact, the patient isn't giving it a chance. "Doctors want to provide the most accurate individualized care, but we need complete honesty from our patients," adds Reed. That includes fessing up to any herbal remedies or supplements you've tried. Don't keep your doc guessing. ▷



booking consultation times that not only work for you but also allow a little leeway in case your doctor is running behind.

## SURPRISES SLOW US DOWN

Speaking of delays, the most likely reason you're stuck sitting in the waiting room is other patients. There are those who show up late. And then there are those who introduce new concerns during a session. That can shift a doctor's daily agenda. "All it takes is one person to not be truthful when booking an appointment," says Reed. Before they step in the exam

**JENNIFER H. MIERES, M.D.**





RENEE MATTHEWS, M.D.

## WE LOVE TALKING ABOUT YOUR FAMILY

Reed says it's alarming how many Black women don't know whether their parents or siblings have cancer, diabetes, fibroids or depression. "Not only is it important to know your family history of cancer, but it's also important to know the type and age at diagnosis," she says.

Reed suggests using a family dinner to discuss these important details. "Sit down at least once a year and talk about what's changed in your lives. Health shouldn't be a top secret affair, yet many times people of color guard this information out of embarrassment," says Reed. "Having this information and passing it on to your doctor help us work on tailored screenings and preventive measures based on your health risks."

## THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS TMI

Don't be afraid of dishing with your doc. "We should know every single thing about you," says Reed. "No one ever gives too much information." That's especially important when you're experiencing symptoms that don't seem visible to the naked eye.

"Our community is so hesitant to discuss anxiety and depression, but it's so prevalent among African-Americans," says Reed. "We're brought up to believe being spiritually weak is responsible for mental health issues. But acknowledging anxiety or depression is a sign of strength. Your doctor wants—and needs—to know how you're feeling mentally and emotionally, not just physically."

## SHARE GOOD NEWS

Inform your physician if you've cut down on sodium, started yoga or made other positive changes. "I want to applaud your success and consider the good news because that can influence treatment plans, too," says Reed.

## WE DON'T JUDGE

It's hard to shock your doctor. And that goes for tackling taboo topics like what happens in the bathroom or bedroom. "All body parts and functions are fair game," stresses Mieres. "We're human, too. We all have the same parts. Holding back blocks your ability to live the best, healthiest life possible."

If you're uncomfortable asking a question, write it on paper or rehearse what you'll say before your visit. "Asking if a symptom or an issue can be a marker of underlying disease can take the edge off," suggests Mieres. The atmosphere in the exam room should be one of trust and open communication. "If you ever feel judged, that's a sign this person is not the right doctor for you," she adds.

## TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TECHNOLOGY

"Ask if your doctor has an e-mail address," suggests Matthews. It probably won't prevent a trip to the office if you're sick, "but it may be useful when you have a question about medicine or need clarification on something from your last appointment."

Your doctor's practice may also utilize electronic records, which allow you to look at lab results, track prescription refills and more at your convenience.

## YOU'RE A REFLECTION OF US

Along with keeping you healthy, physicians want to educate and guide you. And if you walk out of the exam room with any misunderstandings, they haven't done their job.

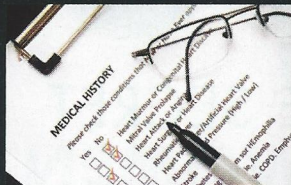
Mieres suggests to start with saying, "Here's how I understand today's visit...." Then summarize treatments, symptoms and other items covered in the exam.

## 4 THINGS TO TAKE TO YOUR NEXT APPOINTMENT



### 1 A MEDICINE SYNOPSIS

Snap photos of the medicine labels and store them on your phone, make a list of your prescriptions or even take the bottles with you. Matthews says this information is essential in preventing unwanted drug interactions.



### 2 MEDICAL RECORDS

Physicians don't usually compare notes about a patient. "If you're changing doctors or seeing a new specialist, the person needs to have your records in hand to understand what other treatments you're receiving, your health history and more," says Matthews.



### 3 AN ADVOCATE

Awaiting test results? Bring along a loved one or trusted pal in case the news isn't what you expected or you get nervous at the sight of the doctor. Your friend can write notes and pay attention to details you might miss but want to reflect on once you're out of the office.



### 4 QUESTIONS AND UPDATES

Go prepared with written comments that may slip your mind once you are naked on the table. Always ask, "How will this [a new prescription or diet] affect my life?" Reed says. "You want to know potential side effects or restrictions."