

YOU AND YOUR DOCTOR

Keys to better communication



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Introduction

Illness can be a trying time, but at least you are not alone. Your doctor is with you all the way. But, to tackle your illness better, it is important that you both pull together. And this depends on constant dialogue and good communication.

How can you avoid misunderstandings and ducking of key issues? What can you do to ensure that your doctor meets your expectations as well as possible? Where and how can you obtain information of good quality? Why is it sometimes so difficult to accept a particular treatment or operation? How can you feel more at ease in this relationship?

Take charge of your own health

By expressing your needs and saying how you feel and also your preferences you contribute to improving the care you receive. When you understand what is happening to you, you start to play an active role in your care and your treatments. Through the experience of your illness and the knowledge you have acquired, you can take charge of your own health.

The HUG work in partnership with the patient at every stage of their treatment, in all medical areas and also through other activities such as finding hotel accommodation or undertaking research.

Practical advice

This brochure should help you to communicate with those looking after you and have your say in decisions affecting you. It offers you advice on forging a relationship of trust with them and on making the most of your consultation time.



DID YOU KNOW?

Are you a patient or a helper and want to help improve life in hospital? Then come to our meetings where you can share your point of view on issues such as patient comfort, the medical relationship or even on hospital services and logistics. The objective of these meetings is to find solutions adapted to the needs of everyone.

For more information: ➤ www.hug-ge.ch/patients-partenaires

Getting the best from your consultation

“ Whenever I see my doctor, I forget half the things I wanted to say. How can I do better?”

The 20 or 30 minutes of a consultation often seem too short to deal with all that has happened since last time. So think ahead. Take a few minutes to prepare for your appointment with the doctor and reflect about your concerns.

- ▶ Be ready with the information your doctor needs (see p. 10). Make a list of questions or key words. Even if you don't refer to it, it will boost your confidence to ask questions and request information on the impact of your treatment, its side effects, how long you will be off work, etc.
- ▶ Express your needs and you will feel better about them. Don't hesitate to tell your doctor if you would like more time at your next consultation. Remind the secretary so that she can allow for this when fixing your appointment.
- ▶ Carry a notebook with you, as a progress log (see p. 11), tracing the stages of your illness and its treatment. In an emergency or on admission to hospital, you will find this very useful in communication with the various care providers. It will also help you to keep track of the treatment process.



DID YOU KNOW?

Our professionals have produced brochures and videos to help you manage your illness or your hospital admission better. Browse them at

➤ www.hug-ge.ch and on HUG web TV

➤ www.dailymotion.com/hug

Improving your relationship

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Please tell your doctor if the French language poses a problem to you. The doctor will allow more time and may suggest you use an interpreter if necessary (see p. 13).

“ How can I improve relations with my doctor?”

If you don't feel at ease with your doctor, it is important to discuss this with him or her and explain if something doesn't suit you. Be up-front about what you expect from the doctor (if you need to know more, seek reassurance etc.). Say how you feel (anxious, frightened etc.). Before changing your doctor, it's worth taking the trouble to dispel any awkwardness by steering the dialogue towards your respective feelings and expectations.

- ▶ Take time to pinpoint what is wrong in the relationship with your doctor (see p. 12). You and your doctor stand side by side against the illness affecting you, for which your doctor is not responsible. He or she is there to listen and help.
- ▶ Don't be intimidated by your doctor or by medical language and expertise. Give voice to your hopes and fears, and raise any objections and questions. All this will help your doctor understand you better and adapt the explanations given.
- ▶ Don't play the 'good patient!' Make your thoughts and feelings known. Raise any doubts and describe how you feel (angry, frustrated etc.). This will defuse any conflict, enrich relations and build trust.
- ▶ Even if you are not feeling yourself, you are still the expert on your body. No one is better placed than you to talk about your symptoms and how you are living with your illness. Explain to your doctor how the illness and treatment are affecting your quality of life and describe your beliefs and fears about the illness. Your experience will help your doctor improve the process of your treatment.

Understanding the information

“ I don’t always understand my doctor’s explanations. Should I mention this?”

Your doctor is under an obligation to give you clear, comprehensible information, and must seek to do so. The aim is to enable you to make an informed decision on whether to pursue a treatment or to act on a medical recommendation. Your doctor must give you up-to-date information, commensurate with your needs. These may vary from one consultation to the next.

- ▶ The doctor should find out how much you know already, in order to supplement your information. He or she must allow time to do this. Your role is to be forthcoming about your needs. Conversely, there will be days when you don’t feel like knowing more. Do tell the doctor if this is so!
- ▶ Recapitulate to the doctor what you have understood and what remains unclear to you. Don’t hesitate to request further, simpler explanations and a diagram if necessary. Then you can repeat what the doctor says in your own words, and ask if that is what he or she meant.
- ▶ Get in touch with a support organization. These associations are not a substitute for the doctor. But they do relay valuable information and provide important psychological support. The people who work for them draw on personal experience and contacts with other patients. This means they are familiar both with the general aspects of your illness and patients’ typical experiences and reactions.
- ▶ Find out more from the Internet (see p. 14), and ask your doctor to recommend the most worthwhile websites. Discuss your findings with your doctor so that he or she can adjust the information you have found to your personal circumstances and supplement it where applicable.

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Read also the brochure: “Informations santé sur internet et les réseaux sociaux”, in French and available online ➔ <http://hug.plus/info-sante-web>

Taking time to reflect

“I’ve just had bad news from my doctor and can’t quite take it in. Is this normal?”

Being diagnosed with an illness or suffering a relapse comes as a major emotional shock. For this reason, some people emerge from the doctor’s consulting room in some confusion, remembering little or nothing about it. Taking in and “digesting” a diagnosis of serious illness needs time, and so does decision-making about its treatment. As a rule, a doctor will break the news of a diagnosis on a different occasion from giving information about the illness and possible treatments.

- ▶ Once you have the diagnosis, book a second consultation. Real urgency is rare, so make a point of asking your doctor for another appointment, so that he/she can explain the various aspects of the illness and its treatments.
- ▶ Two heads are often better than one. If you feel the need, attend your appointments with your partner, a relative or friend. Be ready with your questions. This will help you not to lose the thread of your thoughts during the appointment.
- ▶ Find out about the side effects of the treatment and how to mitigate them. Ask your doctor, of course, but also the patient associations (see p. 14).
- ▶ When the doctor tells you the diagnosis and lets you know what treatment is envisaged, he or she should supply detailed information and leave you time to reflect. You are always free to opt out of the proposed treatment. That is why it is so important that you should be able to make a thoroughly informed decision.

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Before consenting to a major operation or treatment, you have the option of referring to another doctor for a second opinion. N.B.: basic health insurance does not always cover this advice. Find out more from your health insurance fund.

Keeping your bearings

“ Seeing all these specialists, I feel quite lost. Who can put me in the picture? ”

The examinations, treatments and tests pitch you into an unknown world and bring you into contact with many new people. You may not keep track of all their specialisms, roles and vocabulary. Furthermore, you find yourself repeating the same information at each new appointment. It's normal to feel lost. To keep your bearings, it is important to touch base frequently with your treating doctor.

- ▶ Your general practitioner or treating doctor remains your first port of call. He or she knows you best and can contact other colleagues with additional information if you so wish. He or she will keep you in the picture throughout your treatment, giving you information on the illness, the roles of the various specialists and the methods of treatment. Don't hesitate to give your GP/treating doctor's name to the other doctors and ask them to forward the information about you to him/her, for further explanation to you later on if required.
- ▶ In hospital, you have two designated contacts: a doctor in charge of your treatment; and an allocated nurse. Together they monitor your treatment and keep you informed. You can ask them any questions you may have.
- ▶ By offering you a listening ear and providing literature, the support organizations are a valuable source of information (see p. 14).
- ▶ Finally, books on your specific illness may also prove useful. The Health Documentation Centre holds many books which it lends out or keeps on the premises for reference (see p.14).

Finding the motivation

“ My doctor is recommending changes in my lifestyle. How can I find the motivation for these?”

Quit smoking, exercise, follow a special diet, take your medicine: such recommendations are often hard to implement in the long term, despite their justification and your doctor’s insistence. To summon up the will to act, you need to be convinced, believe you can do it, and receive support. Relations with your doctor play a big role in your ability to change.

- ▶ Check with your doctor that you have correctly understood the issues relating to your treatment and their repercussions on your daily life. Your doctor may explore where you stand in relation to them and take a close interest in your history: have you any next of kin who can help? What are the implications of your illness for you? What are your beliefs about it? The aim is that you should feel confident to express your doubts and fears and talk about your successes and setbacks.
- ▶ If you feel the need, discuss with your doctor the possibility of making contact with another healthcare professional to learn the new habits which will be part of your life from now on. This may be a dietician, physiotherapist, occupational therapist etc. There are also patient education groups (asthma, diabetes and obesity). Ask your care team about them.
- ▶ Set realistic objectives with your doctor and track your progress. Tell him or her of the difficulties you experience with your treatment and the accompanying instructions.
- ▶ Joint mutual support groups to share your difficulties with people suffering from the same illness. These groups can be a source of motivation and a tower of strength (see p. 14).

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Consider whether what your doctor is proposing is compatible with your priorities and quality of life. Express your preferences so that your doctor can allow for them, including the use of alternative medicines.

Practicalities

Get ready for the consultation

To help your doctor to look after you better, it is worth preparing certain information.

- ▶ Choose how you wish to approach the consultation.
- ▶ If the problems are serious, ask for more time.
- ▶ Make a note of your questions and fears and raise them with the doctor.
- ▶ Before going to the appointment, ask yourself a few questions so that you are clear about them during the conversation. Examples are:
 - What changes have there been since last time?
 - Is the medicine working?
 - Are you experiencing side effects?
 - What impact is the illness having on your daily life?
- ▶ Be precise. Instead of "I often sleep badly", say how long you take to fall asleep and assess the length of your sleep. Instead of "it hurts", specify the duration, intensity and location of the pain.
- ▶ Assess your needs for material and/or psychological support.
- ▶ If this is your second consultation after diagnosis of a serious illness, take the time to list what you have understood and what is still unclear to you.
- ▶ Remember the main points from your medical file. This will prove useful when you are dealing with several specialists, all asking the same questions. This often happens on admission to hospital.

Keep a log of your progress

A log of this kind records the data about your health. What information should it contain?

- ▶ Your personal details.
- ▶ Details of your treating doctor and the main persons involved.
- ▶ A list of the medicines you are taking.
- ▶ A list of counterindications, if any.
- ▶ A list of your allergies, if any.
- ▶ The medical treatment you have received (diagnoses, dates of operations, start of new medicines etc.).
- ▶ Your doctors' observations.
- ▶ Your personal comments.

You are free to create your own log. The domiciliary support institution imad offers a health log (or 'green booklet') for domiciliary care. The nurses in attendance at your home can obtain a log for you to complete yourself.

The Geneva League Against Rheumatism (Ligue Genevoise contre le Rhumatisme) also offers a log for rheumatoid arthritis. The same type of record exists for diabetes and asthma (see p. 14).

Evaluate your relationship with your doctor

Here are some criteria to help you evaluate the attention your doctor pays to your relationship.

- ▶ Your doctor opens the consultation with a welcome, sets you at your ease and shows concern about your health and wellbeing.
- ▶ The doctor explains what he/she is planning on doing and asks if you agree.
- ▶ The doctor is interested in the impact of your medical problem on your private, social and professional life.
- ▶ He/she questions you about your expectations and beliefs relating to your illness.
- ▶ The doctor asks you if you have any worries other than those which prompted the consultation.
- ▶ He/she can recognise how you are feeling (“I can see how difficult this is for you”) and backs you up (“it’s normal to react like that in your situation”).
- ▶ The doctor uses comprehensible language.
- ▶ He/she checks that you understand the issues involved in your treatment.
- ▶ Towards the end of the conversation, he/she summarises what has been said, explains the planned follow-up, checks that this is OK with you, and asks if you have any other questions.
- ▶ At the end of the consultation, the doctor is able to reconnect you with your ‘non-patient’ life (e.g. “enjoy your week in the mountains!”).

Need an interpreter?

Linguistic and cultural differences can prove barriers to communication. The following tips can save you misunderstandings.

- ▶ Using gestures to express yourself is risky, because a gesture may differ in meaning from one culture to another.
- ▶ In an emergency, it is always possible to ask a relative or a member of the hospital staff to assist. But this solution soon becomes awkward when intimate details are involved.
- ▶ Circumstances permitting, it is always preferable to use the services of a professional interpreter. This is the only way to make due allowance for the patient's social and cultural background.
- ▶ A good interpreter is a third party who becomes integral to the relationship. The doctor continues to address the patient, in order not to interrupt the dialogue.
- ▶ Do not hesitate to request the assistance of an interpreter. Whatever your language the care team can call on people specifically trained to work in bilingual medical consultations. Sign language professionals can also ensure quality when working with deaf patients and their doctor.

Resources

and support structures

Sources of support can mean the small associations working with volunteers or institutions with greater resources. They offer general information on the illness, without taking the place of doctors, and can offer practical, material, psychological, social or legal support.

SEP

For people affected by multiple sclerosis and their relatives. Support, welfare/legal assistance, activities.

➤ www.scleroseenplaques.ch

➤ www.multiplesklerose.ch

Alzheimer Association Switzerland - Geneva section

Follow-up and support for patients and their relatives.

☎ 022 788 27 08

➤ www.alz-ge.ch

Association genevoise des diabétiques

Consultations about diet by appointment. Activity and support groups.

☎ 022 329 17 77

➤ www.geneve-diabete.ch

Association Savoir Patient

Combines knowledge and expertise on behalf of breast and prostate cancer patients.

☎ 022 379 49 76/78

➤ www.savoirpatient.ch

Geneva Red Cross

Health & Training Section. Mutual support groups for people suffering bereavement, depression, etc.; support for relatives of Alzheimer's patients.

☎ 022 304 04 04

➤ www.croix-rouge-ge.ch

English Speaking Cancer Association

Follow-up and support.

Drop-in centre

Tue. and Thur., 10 am
to 2 pm or by appointment.

☎ 022 791 63 05

Helpline: 079 531 55 11

➤ www.cancersupport.ch

Fragile

Support for people affected by head injury and their relatives. Mon., Wed. and Thur., 10 am to 1 pm.

☎ 078 683 25 43

Helpline: 0800 256 256

➤ www.fragile.ch

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Books, ebooks, reviews, health portals: Find out more at the library of the University of Geneva (site Uni CMU, University Medical Centre, Av. de Champel 9)
☎ 022 379 50 90, ➔ www.unige.ch/biblio/sante

Groupe Sida Genève

Geneva's AIDS Group offers follow-up/ support, mutual support groups, welfare/legal assistance, material aid.

Mon. – Fri., 9 – 12 am and 2 – 4 pm.

☎ 022 700 15 00

Helpline: 0840 715 715
(daily 9 am – 4 pm)

➔ www.groupesida.ch

General Hospice

Reception

Cours de Rive 12

☎ 022 420 52 00

➔ www.hospicegeneral.ch

Ligue genevoise contre le cancer

The Geneva League against Cancer provides follow-up/support, material aid, support for relatives.

☎ 022 322 13 33

➔ www.lgc.ch

Espace Médiane (left bank)

Mon. 11 am – 5 pm,

Tue. – Fri., 11 am – 7 pm

Rue Leschot 11

Espace Médiane (right bank)

Mon. – Fri., 12 am – 4 pm

Rue des Grottes 20

Ligue genevoise contre le rhumatisme

League Against Rheumatism is for people – children and adults – living with bone and joint problems.

Follow-up/support, mutual support groups, welfare/legal assistance.

☎ 022 718 35 55

➔ www.laligue.ch

Ligue pulmonaire genevoise

Geneva Lung Association for people – patients and their relatives – coping with disorders of the respiratory channels.

Follow-up/support, mutual support groups and material aid.

Mon. – Fri., 8.30 – 12 am
and 1 – 5 pm

(by appointment).

☎ 022 309 09 90

➔ www.lpge.ch

Parkinson Suisse

Mon. – Fri., 1.30 – 5 pm

Western Switzerland office:

☎ 021 729 99 20

Parkinson Genève:

☎ 022 789 19 57

➔ www.parkinson.ch

Pro Infirmis Genève

For people coping with mental or physical handicap.

Support/follow-up, welfare/legal/material assistance, support for relatives.

Mon. – Fri., 9 – 12 am
and 2 – 5 pm

except Tue. afternoon.

☎ 022 737 08 08

➔ www.proinfirmis.ch

Pro Mente Sana

For people affected by mental illness and their relatives. Social/legal assistance.

Telephone help

Mon., Tue. and Thur.,

10 am – 1 pm.

☎ 0840 0000 60

Psychosocial advice:

☎ 0840 0000 62

Legal advice:

☎ 0840 0000 61

➔ www.promentesana.org

Proasca

For people affected by prostate cancer and their relatives.

Support.

☎ Hotline: 022 322 13 13

➔ www.proasca.net

Pro Senectute

For 'senior citizens' and their relatives. Welfare/legal/financial assistance and support for relatives.

☎ 022 807 05 65

➔ www.ge.pro-senectute.ch

Vivre comme avant

For women affected by breast cancer, 'Live as Before' offers follow-up/support.

☎ Helpline: 078 613 98 34

☎ 079 210 80 92

➔ www.vivre-comme-avant.ch

Other useful addresses

Association pour la permanence de défense des patients et des assurés (APAS)

An association safeguarding the interests of patients and insured persons. Offers advice on patient rights, legal proceedings and insurance.

Mon. to Fri., 10 – 12.30 am and 2 – 6 pm.

☎ 022 786 35 11

Bureau central d'aide sociale

The central social security office provides drop-in legal advice on health insurance, benefits for loss of earnings and accident insurance.

Tue., 11 am – 6 pm

Telephone advice line, Fri.

☎ 022 310 20 55

HUG Mediation Unit

Available to listen to patients and their relatives.

Rue Alcide-Jentzer 17

☎ 022 372 22 28

Geneva Domiciliary Support Institution

☎ 022 420 20 00

➔ www.imad-ge.ch

Swiss Patients' Organization

Advises patients and insured persons in medical matters.

Telephone consultations

Fri. am and Mon., and Wed.

☎ 022 372 22 22

➔ www.spo.ch