Feeling anxious about having to go to the doctor? Let’s go over several things that will help you get through the process in a more secure manner. These are not all “tips” but points to help you feel more a part of the entire encounter.

1. Doctor-patient communication is difficult because each “party” is coming at the picture from a totally different perspective and probably from a different education level. Doctors are talking to you from an objective perspective. Usually when you’re sitting in his office, the last thing you are concerned about is “objectivity”. You’re scared and most likely in pain or discomfort. These two things do not mix at all. Your mind is not able to focus that well when you’re in a “foreign” environment (the doctor’s office) and when you’re in pain. Understanding this will enable you to realize that the doctor may appear to be unsympathetic or “cold” but he’s really just operating from his normal mode. This is actually good because objectivity is needed in order to appropriately evaluate your symptoms and determine the best course of action. This might also help you look at your interactions more objectively, trying to elevate yourself to their wavelength.

1. When doctors are late, try to avoid getting upset and angry. There is often a good reason for this. It’s so easy to get behind when trying to take care of every patient’s needs (not everyone has problems that will fit into a 10 or 15 minute slot). So, think about how you would want the doctor to take care of you if you were having a very serious/life-threatening condition. Would you want him to rush through so that he wouldn’t get behind for your appointment? The other possibility is that he was held up at the hospital that morning making rounds. He has no control over who gets admitted to the hospital and what their needs are. Again, would you want him to hurry through seeing you in the hospital to make sure he gets to his appointments on time?

1. Not knowing your medications or your medical problems is extremely frustrating to a physician. It’s so hard to know what you mean when you say “the blue pill” or “I think it’s brown but I’m not sure.” Of course most of the medications are probably in your record but that takes extra time to look up and then double check with you that you’re taking them. If you have your list on a 3x5 or 4x6 card, then you’ll be able to easily communicate what those medications are. Not only will that make the time go faster, but it will also impress your doctor.

1. You need to make a symptom diary. When you start having problems you should begin recording them. Write down what your symptoms are, when they started, what makes them better or worse. Write in your symptom diary so that you know how long things have been bothering you and how they have changed (better, worse, different location, different character, etc). Make sure you add your associated symptoms.
1. Write down your questions ahead of time. This is so important. Once you get in the
office, you’ll be distracted and chances are you won’t remember the questions you have and
then you’ll be upset and frustrated when, after you leave his office, you remember that you
didn’t ask the questions.

1. Take something to write with. Take a notebook and pen. At first you may feel
awkward but after you’ve been doing this for awhile, it will seem totally natural – and essential.
You can take notes while the doctor’s talking to you. You can write down instructions and times
to call back. You can get the people in the office to help you write down the things they think are
important.

1. Make sure you ask the doctor for clarification of anything you don’t understand. This
may not be that easy initially because being in that situation tends to intimidate people. But it’s
important to remember that this is your health and your life and you must get things clear. It’s a
good idea to tell the doctor right in the beginning that you will be asking about things you don’t
understand. For some people, it’s difficult to question an authority such as a doctor. But unless
you understand what’s going on and what the doctor wants you to do, you cannot possibly be a
part of the treatment. Remember that it’s your health and you MUST understand what’s
expected of you in order to take charge of your own care. Do not let the doctor push you around

1. You must tell the doctor the entire story. Do not leave things out just because you’re
embarrassed or you don’t think that something is important. If you’re taking herbal medicines or
products, make sure you tell him about that. If you’re having problems at home or you’re
depressed, mention that too. If he doesn’t know the entire truth, he may miss something in the
diagnostic process, or may prescribe something that would interfere with what you’re already
taking. Do not leave anything out.

1. Ask for references, whether that’s handouts, pamphlets, or even internet references.
No one really expects you to understand what’s going on from a ten or fifteen minute
appointment. There are many references for you, and if you have a chronic condition, there are
probably support groups that the staff can give you information about. These references are
important because they will help to answer the questions you’ll think of after you get home. If
you tell the doctor and the staff that having some references or places where you could go look
things up will keep you from bothering them, then that will endear you to their hearts. In
addition, they will increase your knowledge about your condition. This is another essential
aspect of you taking part in your care.

1. Keep track of your information – keep it all in one place. Use file folders for each doctor. You can keep your symptom diary, your insurance forms, directions to the doctor’s office, the phone number, your question log, your advanced directives, information that he has given you etc.

1. Here’s a bonus tip – try to describe your symptoms in different ways BEFORE you go to your appointment. Then share them with a friend or family member to see how they sound. One woman kept saying she felt like there were ants crawling under her skin. She was a friend of mine so I could tease her about this. But when she continued to complain, I tried to see if I could figure out what was going on. I asked her some more questions and then just had her continue to describe the sensation to me. Without prompting she said that it felt as if her skin was tingling. I had an “aha” moment. That helped me realize that she was having some nerve issues. That narrowed it down greatly for me (and her doctor). If she had continued to describe her discomfort as feeling like ants were crawling under her skin, she would have baffled the doctor and not gotten to any diagnosis. So, test your symptoms out on your family and friends. Also notice if the doctor seems to have a blank or strange look on his face, then you'll be able to use some other words to let him know what's going on.

Now you know that doctors and patients are on different wavelengths and that will always be the case – BUT, with the knowledge above you'll be on track to close the gap between the wavelengths. These points should help you understand your visit to the doctor’s office and help you gain more success from that visit. Remember that it’s all in your hands. Be prepared and that should be your motto, not just the Boy Scouts. Keep this list in one of your folders and refer to it before you go see the doctor. Learn from each visit and you'll understand your health and improve it too.

Dr. Wurzbacher is a retired Navy Emergency Medicine Physician who recognized early in her career that she wasn’t good at communication and more importantly that she was probably missing much of what her patients were trying to tell her. Although she was excellent at diagnosing conditions, patients generally need more than that. The Emergency Department is one (of many) places that being good at communication is essential since you have no records to work with and a short amount of time to glean information and make a diagnosis. So, she worked diligently at learning to really HEAR what her patients were telling her. Teaching young doctors and ancillary staff the personal aspects of medicine has become a passion of hers.
Her book, Your Doctor Said What is intended to help patients not only understand why many doctors seem like aliens but also how to empower themselves to deal with them. Check her out at http://www.yourdoctorsaidwhat.com and http://www.yourdoctorsaidwhatblogs.com.