

Your Self-Advocacy Toolkit.

A detailed guide
to getting what you
need and **want** from a
provider **appointment**.



**Hi there,
nice to
meet you!**



This toolkit isn't just about learning, it's about doing. It's about taking the concepts and strategies and putting them into action.

Advocating for yourself in a medical setting can feel overwhelming, but you don't have to do it alone. This toolkit is designed to help you feel more **confident, informed, and prepared** for a healthcare appointment.

Inside, you'll find guidance on how to **ask the right questions, track symptoms effectively, and communicate your needs clearly**. We'll explain the importance of shared decision-making and you will learn practical strategies to help you make the most out of your time with a provider. We will also explore how to build a support system that ensures you feel confident to take control of your long-term health outcomes.

No matter where you are in your healthcare journey, this toolkit is here to support you. Your health. Your voice. Your choices. Let's get started!



Why is advocating for your health important?

Understanding how to talk to a healthcare provider about your needs is important. Being able to let the right people know what's going on will help to make sure you are getting the best care available.

When it comes to your health, you are your own best advocate. No one knows your body, symptoms, or experiences better than you do. Despite this, talking to a provider can feel intimidating, and it's easy to feel rushed, dismissed, or unsure of what to prioritize when you are struggling with multiple symptoms. Advocating for yourself helps ensure that your concerns are taken seriously, your questions are answered, and your treatment aligns with your needs and values.

Remember, advocacy isn't about challenging a provider - it's about working together. Research shows that shared decision-making leads to better health outcomes, greater satisfaction with care, and fewer unnecessary treatments. Preparing for appointments, asking for explanations when things aren't clear, and voicing your priorities, means you play an active role in your health outcomes. The more informed you are, the better care you can receive.

Health Concern

Let's start with the main concerns you are navigating. What new or existing symptoms do you need to discuss with your healthcare provider?

Example: I've missed my period for two months in a row.

Appointment Goals

What is the ideal outcome you have in mind for your appointment? Try to ask yourself this question: at the end of my appointment I will be happy if...

Example: My provider books me in for some blood tests and scans.

Pain Points

Now, let's dig a little deeper. How do your concern(s) impact you daily? For example, do they prevent you from achieving tasks or impact your work?

** Example: My mood is so low I avoid seeing the people I care about.*

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Symptom History

If your concerns are connected to your period (such as heavy bleeding) it will be useful to pay attention to your cycle and think about the following.

When did you first start experiencing your symptoms?

Tracking your cycle and your symptoms

Keeping track of your symptoms can help you to communicate more effectively with your provider. A clear symptom history can lead to faster, more accurate diagnoses and treatment plans that meet your needs.

Clear, detailed symptom tracking is one of the most effective tools you have when it comes to advocating for your health. Symptoms change over time, which can make it difficult to recall details during an appointment. Recording your experiences consistently helps to create a clear picture of what's happening for you, supporting shared and informed decisions.

Tracking your symptoms can also reveal patterns such as when certain issues get worse, what might be triggering them, and how they impact your daily life. This information can be especially useful when dealing with conditions connected to your periods or cycle. The more specific you can be, the better equipped you will be to get the care and treatment you need.

Use these following questions to understand your symptom situation

The main symptom or concern I want to address is _____
_____.

Some of these questions may not seem relevant to your situation (for example if you do not know the length of your cycle because you are using a contraceptive). Try to answer these questions as best you can or make a note of other relevant factors that may be related to these questions.

Question one

When did you first start experiencing symptoms? _____

Question two

Do these symptoms happen at a particular time in your cycle?
(e.g. midway through your cycle, before, during or after your period).

Question three

What is your average cycle length? If it's irregular try and provide details.
Your cycle length is the number of days between the first day of your period (day one) and the day before your next period starts.

Question four

How many days does your period typically last? _____

Question five

Where in your cycle are you right now (e.g. day 22) _____

Question six

Are you taking any medications, including contraceptives or supplements?

What is shared decision-making?

Shared decision-making is a term used to describe the joint process in which you and your provider make choices about your health and your care together.

Rather than just following routine clinical recommendations, when shared decision making is utilised, by a provider, you are invited to become actively involved in the decisions made about your care. Your provider should consider your values, preferences and lifestyle alongside the clinical evidence. This ensures your concerns are heard, your options are clearly explained, and you have a say in your care.

Research shows that when patients are engaged in decision-making with a provider they experience better health outcomes, greater satisfaction, and more confidence in treatment choices. Advocating for yourself can mean asking questions, weighing the risks and benefits, and ensuring your treatment plan and care options align with what matters the most to you.

As well as preparing information to bring to your appointment about your symptoms, you may want to consider bringing an emotional support person with you. Having a trusted friend or family member accompany you to an appointment can help to ensure you remember key details that are important to you. They are also able to offer additional advocacy on your behalf if you are feeling overwhelmed.

Before your appointment find some time to sit down and make a note of all of the factors that are important to you when it comes to treatment. This could be related to your family history, your lifestyle, or your beliefs. You may want to do this activity with a friend so they are able to ask questions that will help determine your boundaries regarding options that will or will not work for you.

Treatment Barriers

Example: I do not want to get an IUD, are there other options?

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Family History

Example: My mom had breast cancer, does this impact my options?

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Lifestyle & Schedule

Example: I struggle to remember to use a medication on a daily basis.

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Current Capacity

Example: I am a caretaker so I can't attend in person appointments.

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Understanding your treatment options

Making informed decisions about your care means understanding all available treatment options, including their benefits, risks, and alternatives including how these align with your health needs.

After your provider has a good picture of what's going on for you (usually towards the end of your appointment) you will need to discuss treatment options. Every treatment, whether it's medication, lifestyle changes, or a procedure - comes with potential benefits, risks, and alternatives. Asking the right questions can help you to understand what will work for you.

Having a conversation in which you compare the pros and cons of each treatment choice and weigh up each decision with what matters to you most is key. It's important that you feel your healthcare provider is listening to your needs and preferences and that they're factoring this into any decisions you're making jointly about the next steps.

Your appointment is a chance to ask questions. There really is no such thing as a silly question when it comes to your health. Remember that it's OK to ask your provider to explain things a few times if they say something you don't understand. Medical terms are only useful if you know what they mean and they help you to understand your own health.

At your appointment your provider will want to talk to you about treatment options to help support you to manage your symptoms. You should ask them about all of the options available to you and for a clear description of the risks and benefits of each of these options. This includes talking about the possibility of doing nothing and continuing as you are.

What are my options?

Risks and benefits

Can I do nothing?

Impact on my life

Arriving at the decision that's right for you

Feeling confident in your healthcare choices means considering your options, asking the right questions, and making decisions that align with your needs and values. You have the right to take your time and seek clarity.

Making a decision about your health isn't just about following a provider's recommendations, it's about choosing an option that feels right for you. Taking the time to weigh your options, ask questions, and reflect on your priorities will ensure you feel confident in the decision you make. Remember you can take time to think about your options and explore alternatives.

Shared decision-making means you don't have to make choices alone - your provider is there to guide you, but your voice matters in the process. Consider what matters most to you. Does the treatment fit your lifestyle? Are you comfortable with the risks and benefits? Do you need more information or a second opinion? A well-informed decision is the one that feels right for you.

When arriving at a decision about treatment, it's a good idea to check back in with yourself about why you are seeking support. The following questions can help you to gain clarity when making a decision.

Question one How do I feel about my health right now? _____

Question two What are your worries about this health concern for the future? _____

Question three What are your hopes and priorities for the future? _____

Question four How could this health concern impact those future goals or aspirations?

Question five What are you willing or NOT willing to sacrifice? _____

How to deal with provider ‘pushback’

When a provider dismisses your concerns, staying firm and asking the right questions can help. Reinforcing your needs can help ensure your voice is heard and your care is taken seriously.

Advocating for yourself isn't always easy. This is particularly the case if you feel like a provider is rushing through explanations, dismissing concerns and downplaying your symptoms. While most providers want to help, there may be biases and time constraints impacting your experience of care, making it difficult to feel you are a priority.

If you experience pushback from your provider, stay firm and focused. Restate your concerns clearly, ask direct questions, and request further explanation on a matter if something doesn't feel right. Remember, you deserve to receive respectful, patient-focused care, and it's okay to push for the answers and support you need.

The following prompt is to remind you that you deserve to feel heard by your provider

I am the expert in my own body and I deserve to feel... _____
_____.

Great! Now let's look at some short phrases that can be used to help you gain more clarity when talking to your provider. You can practice these before your appointment if you are feeling nervous.

NAVIGATING PUSHBACK

I want to make sure I understand - can you clarify that for me?

Can you explain why you don't agree with that concern?

Are there any other options we could consider?

I would love to hear your thoughts on the research I've been doing.

Is there anything further I should know about that treatment?

Are those all of the possibilities available for treating my symptoms?

It can be really difficult to navigate a situation in which a provider dismisses your concerns or makes you feel the decision you are opting for is not the 'right' one. Polite but firm phrases can be useful in these moments to call on for support. Remember, if you're feeling overwhelmed, it's OK to take a break from the appointment and make a decision at another time when you feel more comfortable.

FIRMER PHRASES

I really appreciate your insight. I'd still like to explore other possibilities.
Can we discuss that?

I value your expertise and want to make the most informed decision.
Could you walk me through why you are recommending this option?

I understand that this might not seem clinically urgent, but it's really impacting or affecting me. Can we take another look at what could be going on?

I respect your guidance, but I'd feel more comfortable with additional testing or a second opinion before I make a decision. Can we discuss that as an option?

Setting realistic expectations for an appointment can help you to feel in control

While sadly some providers can lack patience and empathy, many are simply just overwhelmed and strained by the demands of a stretched healthcare system. While it can be frustrating, managing our expectations and setting realistic targets for healthcare appointments or 'appointment goals' can be helpful. If you have multiple symptoms, it might be a good idea to think about booking a double appointment, or a series of visits with your provider as opposed to just one appointment.

This approach will help you to feel less stressed about communicating in a time sensitive environment, and will help your provider to feel more equipped to develop a care plan that's right for you.

Try these guided questions to help you think about what time frame, or number of appointments you may need to help you achieve your goals, before setting an expectation for these appointments.

Symptoms

I need to talk to my provider about the following symptoms:

Appointments

Given my appointment will likely last between 10-20 minutes, I think a realistic number of appointments to book would be:

Time Frame

I would like to schedule these before (e.g. the end of the year):

Expectations

After I have attended these appointments, I would like to have:

Your next steps in advocating for yourself

Take a moment to reflect on the exercises you have completed. Think about what you want to get out of your next provider appointment. Which of the advocacy techniques could help you arrive at a positive outcome?

Advocating for yourself in healthcare settings is a skill - one that takes practice, confidence, and the right tools. Preparing for your appointments, tracking your symptoms, understanding your options, and standing firm in your needs will ensure you are able to take an active role in your care. Remember that it's okay to ask questions, seek second opinions, and push for clarity when it's needed. We hope you have found this toolkit helpful and that it supports you to receive the care and respect you deserve. You may be your own best advocate, but we're here to be your ally every step of the way.

TIPS:



Remember, tracking your symptoms consistently is key.

You are the expert in your own body. If something doesn't feel right, it's important to seek care and treatment!

About Hormonally

Mission

Hormonally is an independently funded nonprofit dedicated to providing inclusive educational tools and programs that bridge critical gaps in healthcare accessibility. We challenge misinformation and the vested interests that put people's health at risk, empowering women to take control of their health, their bodies, and their futures.

Vision

To create a world where all individuals, regardless of background, have equitable access to unbiased health information and resources.

hormonally.org/about-us

Enjoyed this toolkit? Help us to keep resources like this free

If this toolkit helped you to feel more prepared and confident for your next appointment, consider paying it forward. Hormonally works to ensure everyone has access to the information they need to advocate for their well-being, but we can't do that without your support.

As an independently funded nonprofit, we rely on community action to keep resources like this free and accessible. Your donation - big or small - helps us to continue developing further tools and resources that support women to achieve better health outcomes.

hormonally.org/donation-form



Join the community

At Hormonally we are committed to building a community of allies that can help one another. You can learn a lot from other people's experiences and while speaking up can be daunting, it can also be empowering. Most importantly, sharing your story might help someone else feel validated. Have a story about your own health journey? We'd love to listen. Head to hormonally.org/hormone-allies.

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