

Tips for Talking to your Doctor about Medical Concerns

Many parents have concerns about their child – their child’s weight, appetite, sleep habits or bowel habits. Because these aren’t as worrisome as things like a fever or rash, some parents are hesitant to bring them up with their doctor, thinking their doctor is too busy for minor concerns. Every concern is important when it comes to your child’s health, and parents can do their best for their child when they are well informed. This material is intended to help parents discuss these concerns with their doctor so that they can better meet their child’s needs.

Before the visit:

Inquire from your physician’s nurse how long the visit is expected to take

Make a written list of your concerns. Prioritize these from the most urgent to the least urgent. It often helps to include specific points to help your physician better understand, such as:

- **What happens that concerns you,**
- **When it happens,**
- **Any associated occurrences,**
- **How long it goes on,**
- **What makes it better or worse**
- **The first time the problem occurred and any associated occurrences at that time**

For Example: “I have trouble getting John to fall asleep. It usually takes 15-20 minutes. He then wakes up about 3 hours later and is up for another hour before falling back to sleep”

Send or fax the list of concerns preferably to your physician’s nurse and ask for the list to be placed in your child’s medical record prior to the visit. Include note that you understand physician may not have time to address everything but you wanted to alert staff so that physician could prepare if possible

At the visit:

- **Be patient with your physician.** Required exams and tests at certain health supervision visits will take priority during the visit. However, if your physician runs out of time to address your concerns, plan to schedule a follow up appointment to simply cover your concerns.
- **If your physician asks about your concerns, answer directly and to the point. Don't be embarrassed to ask for clarification if you don't understand something** (Say, "I'm not sure what you mean by that", "Can you repeat that").
- **If you believe that your physician has not understood a pertinent point, politely say "I want to emphasize...."**
- **Advocate for your child, but be prepared to accept answers like "I will need to investigate that and get back to you" or "that question may best be answered by your autism specialist as I don't know".** If your physician still needs time to gather answers, ask her about when to expect a response (one or two days, next week, etc).
- **The use of a respectful, calm and patient tone of voice can go a long way.**
- **Learn to recognize when your concern is just being ignored or your physician truly believes the concern is not a problem.**

For Example:

Parent: "I'm concerned about John's diarrhea, but you say not to worry. How can you say that?"

Doctor: "Because there is no sign of a serious problem"

Parent: "How can you say that?"

Doctor: "John is growing fine on his growth chart, blood tests show no infection, he is not dehydrated, he is still eating 3 meals a day plus snacks, his sleep hasn't changed. These are signs that this diarrhea is not serious"

Parent: "Thank you. That is a clear explanation. I am more comfortable with that However, is there anything we can do to help with the diarrhea?"

If you are still not satisfied with the answers, ask your physician for a referral to a specialist in the area of your concern. You may respond by saying, "Doctor, I am truly worried about my child's (concern). You have given me no answers that make me feel less worried. Is there a specialist in the area of my concern to whom you can refer my child?"

At the end of the visit, ask your physician when you should follow up with the nurse about progress regarding the recommendations your physician has given you at the visit

After the visit:

- **Report back to the office regarding your child's response to the recommendations provided by your physician during the visit.**
- **Check in with your nearest ATN site for more answers if you continue to have concerns or logon to:**

www.autismspeaks.org/atn

ATN and AIR-P working together with families to improve the care fo children and adolescents with ASD