

Going To The Doctor, When They Don't Want To Go Advice For Those Providing Dementia Care

One of the toughest caregiving scenarios is getting a confused person with Alzheimer's the medical attention they need. Many caregivers and family members express tremendous grief and frustration over this part of caregiving. Most individuals with memory loss will visit a trusted doctor or health care provider willingly, given extra reassurance, encouragement, planning and effort. But when behaviors such as paranoia, delusional thinking, anxiety, depression or anger are present, caregivers often feel taking the confused person to the doctor's office is an impossibility. Unfortunately, sometimes it is an unrealistic expectation and may not be the best answer to a challenging situation.

What to do?

Make an initial effort to visit the doctor by trying out the suggested approaches listed below. If your efforts are unsuccessful, then look for other resources and ways to get your loved one needed medical help. Here are key approaches to try:

Plan and prevent: Plan ahead to prevent catastrophic reactions to visiting the doctor. Talk about your concerns about the visit and about the patient with the doctor, the nurse or clinic personnel in advance. Have foresight into potential obstacles to making the visit to the doctor's office. Think about what might cause the Alzheimer's person to become agitated, fearful or anxious. Plan to take items of distractions such as food, beverages, reading materials, etc.

Simplify: Keep it simple, make it simple. Give your loved one only the information he or she can handle. Going into long exhaustive explanations will trigger an argument. You're already apt to feel anxious about the visit, and this is communicated to the person with dementia, so stay calm. Limit the amount of information that the confused person must remember. Your ability to communicate concern without putting the Alzheimer's person on the defensive is central to a successful visit.

Support: Ask a friend or family member to accompany you and the person with dementia to the doctor's office. An extra set of hands can be a tremendous help in making the trip go smoother. He or she can help distract the person, sit with the person while you park the car, or take the person for a short walk while you complete paperwork or pick-up a needed prescription.

Begin your effort with your loved one's physician or other healthcare provider. If you can't get the Alzheimer's patient to the clinic because he or she is experiencing abnormal levels of suspiciousness, anger, anxiety, sadness or fear, then call the doctor or nurse and explain the problem. Be clear and to the point about your situation and the challenges you are experiencing. He or she should be able to make arrangements for help. In addition, obtain instructions as to what to do in case of an urgent need for medical attention. This applies to after clinic hours too. Some physicians, if able and feasible, have been known to make a house call for longstanding patients. If the person belongs to a healthcare network or managed care plan check with the program's consulting nurse or case management department for options.

Another helpful resource to seek out (dependent upon availability) is an outpatient program that doesn't require visiting the doctor's office. Geriatric-psychiatric programs usually available through a local hospital or mental health agency offer the advantage of home visits by professionals. Some day health centers and senior centers also offer a geriatric nurse practitioner or even visiting psychiatrist that will see patients right in the center, a real benefit. Some area regions offer geriatric or mental health

crisis intervention teams, which involve multi-disciplined assessments and stabilization of the situation within the patient's own home.

To access any of the different types of programs mentioned call your local hospital, mental health agency, or senior information and assistance. If you feel that your loved one requires something more and the situation is urgent, your local crisis line is an excellent resource for referral and immediate access to appropriate help. For situations that are clearly an emergency call 911 (if available in your area) for emergency medical response. The Alzheimer's Association can provide additional information about programs that may help you in your caregiving efforts. Call us at 1-800-848-7097.

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