

## Introduction

It is likely that during the time you are under the care of the Liver Unit at the Freeman Hospital, you will see a doctor in the outpatients department. Here you will have a consultation (if possible with a friend or family member in attendance). It may be your first visit or you may have been before (follow-up consultation).

Unfortunately in the busy outpatient clinic the time for each consultation is limited. It is therefore important to make the most of the time.

The aim of this leaflet is to explain what you can prepare before the consultation to make the most of this time.

## The Consultation

The structure of the patient/doctor consultation generally follows a certain format. This is;

- ◆ Taking a history - getting information from you the patient.
- ◆ Performing an examination - e.g. listening to your chest/heart or examining your abdomen.
- ◆ Review investigations - e.g. blood tests or X-rays.
- ◆ Discussion - an explanation of the findings, diagnosis and their significance. Looking at different treatment options and considering which one is most suitable for you. Answering of any questions you may have. Deciding on a plan of action including follow-up arrangements.

Typically, consultations in the outpatient department are set between 10 and 15 minutes. The actual amount of time needed may vary slightly but are generally about this length. Although the amount of time spent on each section (above) is not fixed, often getting certain necessary information from you the patient (taking a history) takes a significant length of time.

If you could have this information ready, then this section will take less time.

This will mean more time for the discussion section (which frequently does require more time) and more importantly gives you the opportunity to ask the doctor questions.

What information to have ready

1. Personal information - name, date of birth,

address. We normally have this on record, but for example having mobile phone numbers available and relative contact details (including mobile phone numbers) is very useful. There are occasions when we may need to contact you urgently (e.g. regarding a blood test result or if you are awaiting a liver transplant, the call to come into hospital).

2. A short history of the main problem - Even though you may have come to the Liver Unit at the Freeman Hospital via another doctor and given them this information (which is likely to be documented in the medical notes) we like to hear 'your story' from you. This gives us the opportunity for us to gain information and a little insight into your illness and you as a person. While this is very important, some time spent preparing the information will mean there is more time for discussion and questions.

We need to know what your symptoms are, when did they start, have they changed. Examples of symptoms are pain/discomfort, sickness, itching and jaundice (yellowing of the skin). It is often useful to tell us when you last felt completely well. If this is a follow-up visit we need to know how they have been since your last visit.

3. Past medical history - this means a list of all the operations that you have had (and dates). Also any other major illnesses that you suffer from now or have had in the past (E.g. High blood pressure, diabetes, heart attack). This information will be in your medical notes, but it will save time if you have it to hand to tell us if asked. Don't worry, you're not expected to know all the medical details.

4. Medications & allergies - You may be taking medications. It is very important for us to know what they are. You could either bring the medications in with you or prepare a list (with the dosage) for us to look at. We also want to know what allergies you have, if any.

5. Social information - We will need to know what you do for a living, how much alcohol you drink and whether you smoke tobacco or take/have taken any illicit drugs.

Checklist:

To make the most of your consultation try to have as much information ready as possible.

- ◆ Contact details
- ◆ Details about your symptoms
- ◆ Past medical history
- ◆ Medications that you take

What information you might want

When you see a consultant in their clinic you are seeing a specialist, someone who is an expert in your condition. It is important to use this time wisely and try to get answers to your questions before you leave.

We in LIVERnORTH often hear from patients that they wished they had asked the consultant something when they were in clinic and one of the things we try to do for our members is to try to get answer these questions for them.

Although many of the Freeman's top specialist are available to answer questions for us, it is always more difficult for them after the consultation than it would have been during it. To avoid this problem you may want to take the following list with you when you go to see your consultant.

1. What is the prognosis for my condition? In other words, what will the future hold for me? (the doctor may tell you that there could be several different outcomes, depending on your medication and/or lifestyle).
2. What are the side effects, if any, from the drugs I am taking? (If the side effects are going to be a problem, ask if there are any alternative drugs or even different therapies altogether).
3. What is the name of my condition, what is it called and if it has degrees of progression, what stage am I currently at?
4. Is my condition hereditary and if so, who else in my family is at risk? How is my condition spread? Is it infectious and if it is, what can I do to prevent spreading it?
5. How can I help myself to deal with my condition - are there any support groups or techniques I could try, is there someone else I could/should talk to?

6. What do all of the abbreviations mean? (the doctor or nurse may use acronyms to describe something - ask them what they mean, don't leave in ignorance).
7. Where can I get more information about my condition, is there a leaflet or book I could read in my own time?
8. What do I do if I am suddenly ill with my condition? Who do I contact and what will they do?

In addition to the above list, you may have other questions but please remember not to waste the doctor's time, and yours, by asking questions they cannot answer. For instance car parking, bus or ambulance timetables, meals and waiting times for appointments are all outside of your doctor's control and they won't be able to answer you. If you do have to wait a long time for your appointment, please remember that people sometimes need more time than they are allocated and perhaps your doctor is giving people the time they need to be dealt with properly.

Finally, if for some reason you are unhappy with your consultant then you are entitled to ask to see someone else. The consultant can recommend someone or you can make your own enquiries and ask to be referred to a new doctor of your own choice, even at a different hospital. The NHS is currently working hard to make patient choice easier and the law changed on April 1st 2008 to give patients greater choice. Information on patient choice will be available from your local Healthwatch or from your consultant or nurse.

LIVERNORTH is indebted to: Mr Jeremy French FRCS, Consultant Surgeon at the Freeman Hospital, Newcastle upon Tyne for his professional contribution to this information leaflet.

LIVERNORTH can help you

As well as having many health professionals as members, we have access to extensive information on all liver diseases and treatments.

Contact us for more information (details below).

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**LEAFLET 9**

# You & Your Consultant



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