**Communication with healthcare professionals**

The best partner for a healthcare provider is a well-informed, self-aware patient. This handout provides some ideas to help people with arthritis (and any chronic condition) become the best possible partner.

**Know the people on your healthcare team and their expertise and roles**

* **Primary care physician**: Knows you/your child, takes care of intercurrent illnesses, provides routine care, knows local resources, facilitates transfer of information and can help coordinate care.
* **Rheumatologist/pediatric rheumatologist:** Specialist in rheumatic diseases. Four years of medical school, three years of residency and another two or three years of specialty training. Expert in rheumatic diseases and complications, prescribes medications and oversees plan with input from the patient and other team members.
* **Nurse practitioner, nurse specialist:** works with the rheumatologist in providing care; teaching about disease, medications and shots; renews prescriptions. Often best and easiest to reach for questions and access to specialist.
* **Physical therapist:** range of movement and exercise programs, ambulation and mobility issues.
* **Occupational therapist:** hand/upper extremity function, activities of daily living, splinting/adaptive equipment.
* **Social worker:** adjustment to chronic illness, insurance and financial issues, school/work adaptations, referrals for counselling.
* **Psychologist/mental health specialist:** provides counselling/support for depression, chronic pain issues.
* **Other specialists:** dependent on individual needs, e.g., orthopedist, ophthalmologist, nephrologist, integrative medicine provider, etc.

**Preparing for your clinic visit**

Clinic visits can be a challenge. Time is limited and there is a lot to cover. Anxiety can be high and can affect how you give and hear information. Anticipating and preparing makes the visit much more effective and satisfying. Plan what you want to talk about and set your priorities. (It’s OK to bring your list of questions.) Some people find it helpful to bring a log of symptoms or use another tracking device.

* **Be prepared to answer standard rheumatology questions**
  + **General assessment:** overall wellbeing, general health issues.
  + **Specific symptoms:** e.g. Joint pain, morning stiffness, fevers, functional limitations, etc.
  + **Medication review:** what you are taking (including over the counter and alternative medicines, and those prescribed by other providers), how well current medications are working, any side-effects, what happens if you skip a dose, problems with access to meds.
* **JA Parents - encourage children to be engaged in the visit**
  + For children, encourage them to be in tune with their bodies and ask and answer questions.
  + For teens, expect that the parent will be asked to leave the room at some point to allow teens to learn how to manage their own healthcare, as well as discuss sensitive topics without the parent present.
* **Wear easy to remove clothing**
* **Check medication supply before you leave for the visit**
  + Request refills if needed (more efficient than calling for refills later)
* **Avoid distractions**
  + Turn off your phone and if you must bring children or siblings, bring a self-entertaining activity for them.
* **Ask someone to go with you** 
  + Sometimes bringing a supportive friend or family member can help, especially if complex or scary information is being communicated. We know that patients often hear only a fraction of the information being conveyed, and that a second set of ears can supplement and reinforce what is being said.
* **Request a written discharge plan**
  + Especially if there are changes in medications or the overall plan.
* **Follow up** 
  + Ask what your provider would like to be notified about between visits.
  + Write down questions as they come up.

**Who, what and how to contact with issues between visits**

* Some clinics use a patient portal, a phone line or email. Know the best way for you in your setting.
* Decide (and there’s a learning curve on this) which issues should be handled by the primary care physician and which should go to the rheumatology clinic.
* Always identify the urgency of the problem. A routine prescription refill will be handled differently than a bad reaction to medications.
* Always give a way you can be reached – cell phones have made this much easier. The provider is not always able to return a call immediately and will be frustrated if they need to make multiple attempts to contact you.
* Call during office hours except for a true emergency.

**Using the internet – it can be your friend, but be careful**

* **Look for reliable sites (hint .edu, .org, .gov)**
  + The internet is unfiltered, and anyone can post anything, so look for evidence-based opinions.
  + Beware of individual testimonials and any site selling something.
* **Don’t let Dr Google drive you crazy**
  + For example, drug makers are required to post all possible side-effects, but get perspective on how common or severe these are. (Usually very uncommon or the drug wouldn’t have been approved.) Get input from your provider.

**Consultations and second opinions**

* These can be helpful if the diagnosis is uncertain; if the management plan is unclear, e.g., is surgery needed or not; or if the patient or parent is uncomfortable. But it’s not wise to doctor-shop to find someone willing to tell you what you want to hear.
* It’s best to get a referral; always make sure that the records have been transferred so the new doctor has all information and doesn’t need to duplicate tests. The consultant will send recommendations for you and your doctor to review and discuss.

**Be the best partner you can be with your healthcare provider.**

**Be well-informed, self-aware and mutually respectful.**