

Now Wait Just a Minute! (or maybe 30...)

If you've ever been to the doctor, you likely have done some waiting. It may have been only 5 minutes, it may have been over an hour, but some wait is common. A quick "Google" search reveals hundreds of articles, blog entries, and general commentary on the doctor's waiting room. So, why do we wait? And what can be done about it? (Yes, I said "we". Even doctors wait to see doctors!)

Reasons for waiting vary widely. Although we like to think that delays are due to "circumstances beyond our control", such as emergencies, some delays are entirely manageable. Poor scheduling practices (for example, scheduling patients with known complex or time-consuming problems back to back) are obviously avoidable. As a rule, though, doctors don't know how complex or time-consuming a visit may be. To take an example from my own practice, if you schedule a routine annual gynecologic exam, such a visit may take only 10 minutes to complete. However, many such visits reveal other medical issues or questions which need to be addressed. Depending on the complexity of the issue, it may add as much as 30-45 minutes onto the visit! If I have an annual exam scheduled at 9:30, and another at 9:45, but the 9:30 appointment becomes more complex, chances are that 9:45 patient will not be seen on time.

Here's the key point to remember. Waiting times are not long because we sit in our offices with our feet up laughing at your expense. (Seriously, from my Google search it seems some people out there actually believe this!) The most likely reason you are waiting is that whoever precedes you on the schedule has medical concerns or questions which need to be addressed, but could not be predicted beforehand. Remember, though, that when your turn comes, I will spend an equal amount of energy and time with you – which may in turn delay whoever follows you.

These are delays which cannot be avoided. So, what can you do to decrease the waiting time? Here are some "insider tips", some of which you may have already heard:

1. **Schedule the first appointment of the morning or afternoon.** The first appointment is much less likely to be delayed than one later in the day.
2. **Arrive early.** Though you likely won't be seen early, most offices require some amount of paperwork at many visits, *even if it isn't your first visit with the doctor.* If you arrive 10 or 15 minutes early to your appointment, you will be more likely to see the doctor on time.
3. **Do necessary paperwork ahead of time.** Some doctor's offices place any forms you will need to fill out on a website (see our [example](#)). When you schedule an appointment, ask if this is available. If not, most offices will be happy to fax you a copy of the forms. Fill them out beforehand and bring them with you.
4. **Prepare your questions.** An organized list of concerns and questions will almost ALWAYS shorten your visit, and help those following you be seen on time. It also helps to avoid that inevitable statement while standing at the front desk after your visit "Oh, and one more question..."

5. **Bring everything you need with you.** Any relevant medical records, copies of test results, a referral (if you need it) and anything else necessary for a thorough visit should be brought with you. This saves having to wait for a referral, or call another doctor's office for results, before you can be seen.
6. **Call before your visit (if you have time constraints).** If you call before you come in, it may be possible for the office staff to let you know how backed up the doctor is that day. And, if you're told he or she is running behind, you will have the option of rescheduling your appointment and saving yourself the trip and aggravation.
7. **Schedule your appointment wisely.** This means two things: a) be honest with the receptionist about what you are coming in for, so she may schedule appropriately; and more importantly b) don't schedule your appointment when you know you will have to rush to get to another appointment. You don't want to rush your time with me, and you don't want me to try to rush through your appointment because you need to be somewhere else. This often leads to frustration for both of us – some of your questions may not be addressed, and I may not have a chance to thoroughly evaluate the concerns you have brought up at the visit.

Of course, it is always important to be somewhat understanding. The nature of the medical profession (any specialty) dictates that emergencies will occur, causing potentially significant delays. But by following these simple steps, we can all have a much more pleasant doctor's visit!