

COLORADO MOOD & MEMORY CLINIC
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Doctor Visits and the Person with Dementia

Getting persons with Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia to the doctor's office can be frustrating for caregivers, since many persons minimize or deny their cognitive or medical problems and refuse to cooperate. It is important for families to remember that this is a part of the disease. Persons may not realize the extent of their problems, and often, their judgment is impaired. Families may find some of the following ideas helpful in getting someone to the doctor.

- Many persons who have confidence in their physician will go for special evaluations or tests if they hear that "Doctor Jones recommended it," or if it is presented as "just a general check-up to keep in good health now that you are getting older." If your family member has occasions when they realize their losses, this can be a good time to reassure them that there may be help and that it is important to get an evaluation. However, don't expect them to remember if they agree to an appointment.
- Look for ways to prevent catastrophic reactions. When the confused person is even slightly stressed, or when he/she has to think of more things than his/her impaired brain can sort out, he/she may over react by crying, arguing, wandering away or even hitting. Analyze the situation and look for ways to simplify what is going on, so that it is less stressful to the person. You should stay calm as your tension is communicated to the person. Often, this is difficult.
- Simplify what you tell the memory-impaired person. Instead of saying: "We have to get up early today and hurry with your breakfast, because today is your visit with Dr. Brown. I want him to change your medicine." Just get the person up with no comments, serve his/her breakfast, and matter-of-factly help him/her into his coat; then when you are almost there, say "We are seeing Dr. Brown this morning." This is not deceit; it is simply limiting what the confused person must remember, therefore, reducing their anxiety.
- Rather than get involved in an argument, ignore or downplay objections. For example, if the person says: "I will not go to the doctor." Instead of replying, "Yes, you have to see the doctor," say instead "We will stop downtown for ice cream (or lunch, etc.) afterwards." And after the doctor visit, don't forget to ask the person if they still want to get ice cream, lunch, etc.
- Some persons with dementia are more cooperative with certain family members than others. Find out who seems to get the best response from the person and have that family member take the memory-impaired person to the appointment. As a last resort, judicious use of deception may be the only means to get the person to the appointment.

- Take someone with you. A third person can help in the car by taking turns with you to distract the memory-impaired person while you drive to the appointment, as well as sit with the person if you have to talk to the doctor first.
- Appointments may be set for times when the person is more cooperative: for example, mornings may be better than afternoons. If you can eliminate a long wait for the person by having him/her seen by the doctor promptly, this can reduce agitation. Let the doctor know you are bringing in a confused or resistant person and ask if it is possible to get a timely appointment with the doctor. A quiet office is more calming than a busy waiting room. Some families have found it helpful to bring along snacks to keep the person occupied in the office.
- It can be uncomfortable for family members to talk about problems while the memory-impaired person is present. Either talk to the doctor first, or arrange for someone to sit with the person in the waiting room while you talk to the doctor.
- Most persons are cooperative, social, and on their best behavior when they get to see the doctor. However, you may expect some agitation to linger after the appointment, or the person may be angry at the caregiver. Remember:
 - don't take it personally;
 - the anger may be short lived; and
 - your judgment is better than theirs regarding the necessity of the medical visit.
- Bring a list of problems and concerns you have to the doctor visit. Prior to the doctor visit, keep a log book to take with you. Mark down incidents of forgetfulness or behavioral changes, with date/time and brief description of what happened in the log book. Be ready to answer questions about how often a behavior takes place and be able to tell the doctor if you notice a pattern with the problem behavior.