

5 Important Things to Remember During Your Child's Appointments

and Questions to Ask Your Allergist

*Emily*NOLAN

Before heading into your child's appointments, there are five important things to review ahead of time that may help make the process easier:

1. Request a copy of your medical records, including any test results. By law, patients have the right to access their medical records (with very few exceptions). I suggest requesting copies of your medical records for a few reasons.

If you have questions after your appointment, you can use the records to refer back and jog your memory. They're helpful to have to reference or guide you in a conversation if you need to call your doctor with follow-up questions or concerns. You can bring copies to your other appointments with other doctors instead of putting the pressure on yourself to get all of the medical mumbo-jumbo right. If you want to go for a second opinion, you don't have to feel awkward requesting to have your medical records sent to a different doctor in the same field.

2. Remind your medical provider about the patient's medical history. Doctors and nurses see a lot of patients every day. Yes, a lot of them have amazing memories, but you don't want to 100% depend on them remembering (or having recorded) every single detail about your treatment and condition. So why not make your visits a team effort?!

When your doctor asks you what's been going on or how things have been going, use it as an opportunity to recap the takeaways from your last appointment and highlight anything you think they need to know. And, if they don't start off by asking you how things are, make it a point to bring it up on your own and fill them in.

It can be intimidating to do this (especially if you feel like you're being rushed or that the doctor wants to just get started with the appointment), but take your time to go through everything you need to say and remember this is a vital part of the appointment. It directly relates to the reason for your visit and the next steps in your care plan.

Think of it this way, even if it feels unnecessary or bothersome at the time, you are doing a service to both you and your doctor by providing your recap. Only good can come from it.

3. Keep a running list of questions and concerns either on a notepad or on your phone between appointments. This is a great tactic to prevent the “what did I need to tell you?” moment that can often occur during a doctor's appointment. You go to see your doctor for one reason and plan to bring up a question or concern at the appointment, only to get side-tracked with all of the new information that comes up during your visit. The benefits are plentiful:

Your doctor will definitely appreciate it when you use your list to stay focused and organized while being as efficient as possible with your time as well as your doctor's.

It helps you keep track of non-emergent questions or concerns you have between visits and allows you to ask them all at once and get definitive answers from your allergist, pediatrician, or other medical providers.

Since you're working off a written list, use it to your advantage! As you talk to your medical provider, write down the information and answers directly onto your list, and walk away with concrete information you can refer back to later.

4. Recap and ask for written instructions. When your appointment is wrapping up, take a quick minute or two to wrap things up. How do you do this exactly? Acknowledge that the appointment is coming to an end and then confirm that you understand the diagnosis and treatment you're supposed to do at home:

This looks something like, “Thanks so much for your time today. I want to make sure I understand everything before I leave. So, do you think that we are dealing with (insert diagnosis)? When we get home, do you want us to start (insert medication or treatment discussed - include frequency of dosing and amount)? One last thing, is there anything else I need to know?” Or you can ask something along the lines of, “It feels like we went over a lot today. Can you please recap what you think are the most important things I should know before leaving this appointment?”

If you're confused about something your doctor said, you can always ask them to explain it further: "You mentioned something about "X". I feel like it's really important but I didn't understand it that well. Could you please explain it again?" As your doctor explains the information again, feel free to interject with your questions.

Other things you might want to clarify: Is there anything you should look out for or know when starting a new medication (ex., side effects or things such as - does the medication need to be refrigerated or given with food)? Is there anything to be aware of that would indicate treatment is working, or not working for that matter? If you're dealing with a new food allergy diagnosis, you may want to ask about the results and whether you need to be concerned about cross-contact. Also, review your anaphylaxis emergency plan.

Remember, there is no wrong question when it comes to your or your child's health, so know you're doing the right thing when you seek more information.

Also, if you notice you're leaving the office empty-handed, don't be shy. Ask the office staff to make you a quick copy of the doctor's orders or ask them for a piece of paper (or use your phone) to write them down yourself.

Make things easy for yourself and get it all in writing so you know exactly what to do when you get home.

5. Be the middleman. This tip goes great with tip #1 (above). If you're dealing with your child's food allergies, chances are that you have both an allergist/immunologist and a pediatrician. It's vital that all of your child's doctors know what is going on with the patient's health and treatment. Why is this important?

Typically, your doctors are not consulting each other regularly or without prompting, so one doctor is most likely unaware of any new diagnoses or prescribed medications unless they hear it directly from you.

This may come into play in a variety of circumstances. For example, if your child is undergoing OIT, he may not be able to receive a vaccine while undergoing this type of treatment (or he may need to take a few days off of food allergy treatment following getting a vaccine). Your pediatrician may not be intimately aware of the oral immunotherapy treatment protocol, so you would want to make sure it's cleared by your allergist and that being vaccinated would not interfere or have any negative results. Some children with egg allergies may not tolerate the flu vaccine (although a lot can). Your pediatrician may want to give your child this shot, but you may want your allergist to ultimately be the one who makes the call. Additionally, some pediatricians may make dietary recommendations or handle eczema treatment, which can coincide with food allergy issues.

Make it your job to make sure everyone is on the same page before proceeding with any new treatment or recommendations. You want all of your doctors to have all of the correct and up-to-date medical information before drawing any conclusions about your (or your child's) health.

I know how overwhelming an appointment at the allergist's office can be. We're wrangling a child or baby. We're holding them through uncomfortable testing. And we're digesting complex, life-changing information for the first time ever. I have created a list of questions to help you while you're in your appointment that you may want to ask your allergist. If you forgot to ask some of these questions, and not all of these questions may apply to you and your child right now, you can always email them as a follow-up, after the appointment.

General Questions to Ask Your Allergist:

If my child is allergic to ____, could they be allergic to anything else? If so, how do I introduce that allergen, or can we test for it?

If my child is allergic to a tree nut, must we eliminate all nuts or can we introduce other nuts my child can eat and eliminate only the allergenic nuts?

I am breastfeeding (or feeding breastmilk from pumped bags) and want to continue doing so. Do I need to eliminate any allergens from my diet?

Could you look at my child's formula ingredients and help me understand if it's safe for my child with a known food allergy?

If I am uncomfortable introducing allergens to my child after a severe reaction, could I do so in your office to feel more comfortable?

Do you treat and manage food and environmental allergies? What about asthma, should that arise (if it hasn't already)?

How can we tell if my child has a less common food allergy condition like Food protein-induced enterocolitis syndrome (FPIES), Eosinophilic Gastrointestinal Disorder (EGID), or Eosinophilic esophagitis (EOE)? If so, what does that mean? Do you recommend an RDN to help treat and manage the symptoms?

What over-the-counter medications should I keep on hand to help treat food allergies?

Can you explain the bloodwork or skin test results to me?

Can you walk me through when to use the auto-injector? Do you mind demonstrating how to use the auto-injector?

How do I treat a mild allergic reaction (that doesn't require an EpiPen)? What are the differences/pros & cons of Benadryl, Zyrtec, etc?

What are the different methods of allergy testing? (Skin test, blood test, food challenge, OIT) And what's the likely roadmap for my child?

How do I differentiate between a food allergy reaction or a skin reaction? (I.e, dermatitis, eczema) And best topical to use for skin flare-ups.

What is the connection between skin sensitivities, food and environmental allergies, and possibly asthma?

Oral Immunotherapy Questions:

Is Oral Immunotherapy an option for my child? Do you offer it? What does that process look like working with you? If you do not offer it, can you refer out?

How much does OIT cost? Do you accept insurance?

What is the time commitment for OIT?

What items might I need to pursue OIT with you? (Do you recommend a special scale or brand of allergen?)

When pursuing OIT, what does an updose appointment mean? How often are they typically scheduled?

When pursuing OIT and dosing at home in between updose visits in the office, do we dose at the same amount or in small increments?

Do you target multiple allergens during OIT at the same time? Or treat one at a time? And Why?

Do you recommend any outside supplements that would benefit/support my child as they go through OIT? (I.e, probiotics)

What is the overall cost of OIT? Are there payment programs I could be put on? Do you know if my insurance will cover OIT?

*Emily***NOLAN**