How to get the most from your GP - in less than 10 minutes

The easiest way is to break it down into dos and don’ts…

Do

Get to the point…
There’s nothing worse than shilly-shallying around at the doctors. There is no need for embarrassment or coyness, and the quicker you mention why you’re really there, the more time the GP has to deal with your problem. Clearly this can be difficult with emotional problems as it can be hard to open up, but as for the rest, just get on with it. The GP will tease out what he or she needs from you in terms of more information.

Get it all out at the beginning of the appointment…
If you have two items to discuss, list them at the beginning rather than say, ‘And while I’m here’ or ‘There were just a couple of other things’. If you list them at the start the GP can plan out the time. Two items is reasonable.

Bring your diary…
A really good ‘history’ helps us doctors to help you. If you can tell us exactly what happened and when, that makes our job much easier. For example, ‘I was sick on Monday, fainted on Tuesday’. And tell the GP what you have tried – ‘I took Paracetamol and it didn’t help’.

Be descriptive….
GPs listen to stories all day. Using certain words to describe symptoms will help us to identify the problem more quickly. Is your pain dull or sharp? Does it burn? Does your headache feel like a tight band or a sharp and stabbing, for instance? What are you unable to do compared to when you are well?

Ask for a double appointment…
We can’t always give you a double appointment but if you know that you are coming to discuss a complicated issue that is clearly going to take longer than 10 minutes then please ask if a double appointment is available.

Use the rest of the team effectively…
Chasing a referral to the hospital? Ring the secretary. Need a blood pressure check? Use the machine in the waiting room. Need travel advice? Ask for the nurse. Need to see a counsellor? Ask reception if you can self-refer. Worried about your toddler’s weight? See the health visitor. Many services do not need you to see the GP first these days.
Don't

Come in with a huge list of stuff…
If you have four items it’ll probably take you six to eight minutes to talk about all of them. The GP then has to think about each problem, examine you and prescribe the right treatment - all in a couple of minutes. Cramming in too much into 10 minutes is a false economy, making it more likely that the GP will make a mistake.

Expect us to solve everything in one visit…
We live in a convenience culture world but medicine can be a complex business. Most GPs see people who have several ongoing problems at once which need monitoring and maintenance with the help of the rest of the team (nurses, administration, pharmacists and health visitors). Occasionally you will need to wait for referrals to a specialist or try a treatment to see how you get on.

Treat the reception staff as nosy ogres...
The reception staff actually want to help you. But they know how busy the GPs are and sometimes they know they can’t give you exactly what you want, when you want it. If you answer their questions as clearly as possible they will be more likely to be able to ensure you can access the help you need.

Assume you can get an appointment with your preferred GP /nurse exactly when you want...
The GPs and nurses are working constantly the whole time they are in the surgery. But that doesn’t mean that you can necessarily get an appointment with one of them exactly when you want to. They may have other patients, being doing visits, be in a meeting, be doing paperwork or even be on holiday. Trying to be as flexible as possible will really help the staff to help you better.

Think that seeing patients is all that the GP does...
The GP is running late. Sound familiar? About 50% of a GP’s work is administrative. This is because in between appointments he or she is likely to get constant interruptions with urgent messages (home visit requests, prescription amendments, emails from the PCT, calls from the hospital or coroner, queries from the pharmacist, urgent letters and reports etc.). Often there will be a list of scribblings on a GP’s desk, so if the doctor appears a bit browbeaten it’s because they are constantly multi-tasking. Even more reason to follow the DOs above!