

September 2002

Patient Powerline from the desk of Marie Savard, M.D.

RE: Thyroid Disease, Second Opinions and Other Advice

Dear Friend,

I have been asked a number of great questions this month by Mary Shomon, the author of "Living Well with Hypothyroidism: What Your Doctor Doesn't Tell You...That You Need to Know". For anyone interested in thyroid and other autoimmune diseases, she has a wonderful web site and newsletter that is extraordinarily helpful at <http://www.thyroid.about.com>. I thought I would share some of her questions and my answers with you. They are all fabulous questions; ones we are asked all the time. They remind me once again why I am so committed to patient empowerment and teaching patients how to take charge of their health.

QUESTION: As a patient, what can and should I do if I'm calling with an important question (a problematic, uncomfortable -- but not emergency room-worthy -- symptom, or a prescription is running out and I urgently need a refill) and I simply cannot get the doctor to respond, or get what I need from the office. Every time I call, the office staff says they'll pass on the message, or I leave voice mail messages, and I don't get a call back from the doctor. And if I reach staff, they say "We've passed this on to the doctor, but we can't make him or her call you back, we'll just leave another message," etc. -- Betty

ANSWER: I wish I could give you a straight and sure-fire answer, but I can't. You first must ask yourself whether you trust your doctor and want to stick with him/her for the long run. Because if you have not established a longstanding relationship and you could readily change doctors then that makes the most sense. On the other hand, many people really don't have a choice; either their doctor is the best in their specialty or is the only one available. In that case you need to persist. As far as the prescription needing a refill, do everything you can in the future to request the refill long before you need it. Sometimes your pharmacist will help out by calling the doctor's office for you.

If you have troubling symptoms that you need to discuss with your doctor, make an appointment if you can. Many doctors prefer seeing you face-to-face. If an appointment isn't realistic then let the office staff know exactly what is troubling you and why you are so worried. Office staff usually responds better to patients that trust them to give this private information to the doctor. I can remember my own office staff getting angry when patients wouldn't tell them exactly what it was they needed to speak to the doctor about. It is your health on the line, so kindly but firmly persist!

QUESTION: When I have my TSH tested, the office staff at my doctor calls and tells me "your results are normal." When I ask for the specific numbers, sometimes they've said, "oh, all you need to know is that everything is fine," or "the doctor will need to discuss

those with you." When I ask the doctor, I often hear the same response, or "why would you want to know that?" Why is it so difficult to get them to tell me the specifics, and is there something I can do about it? -- Logan

ANSWER: Office staff and even many doctors feel threatened by patients that seem to know a lot about their health conditions - perhaps even more than they themselves know about the condition or test. I have developed a system that helps people get exactly what you want and need - the original copies of your medical records and test results. I describe it in my book, "How To Save Your Own Life", http://www.drsavard.com/system_book.htm. At your next office visit, tell you doctor and the office staff that you would like to assume more responsibility for your health information and will be asking for copies of all test results, consultation reports and hospital discharge summaries. I find it better not to let on that you know so much about your condition or that you are checking up on them, but rather that it just makes sense that you keep copies of all your medical records for future reference. Once you have the results in hand, you can then ask more specific questions about the results.

Give them a self-addressed stamped envelope to remind them of your request. I have developed a sticker for your doctor's chart to help remind your doctor and office staff that you would like this information. If they question your intention, remind them that your health information is important and it may not be available to you if you travel or see another doctor or specialist (it usually isn't) and that legally and ethically you are entitled to copies of all your information. You can download a sample letter requesting your information from your doctor at my website <http://www.drsavard.com/docs/sampeletter.pdf>. The letter also explains exactly why you want the information. Finally, as I say in my book, be polite to the staff at first. As the saying goes, "you get more with honey than vinegar".

QUESTION: I have a feeling that I may have a thyroid problem. I'm having a variety of symptoms like fatigue; weight gain and hair loss, my mother and sister both have a thyroid problem. I'm female, 30, and haven't had any children yet. When I went to my doctor, he said that I was too young to have a thyroid problem, and felt around my neck, said I didn't have a goiter, and so as far as he could tell, my thyroid was fine. I pushed him to do a test, but he said, "I'm the doctor here," and got huffy. What do you think my next steps should be? -- Erica

ANSWER: You are right to be concerned about the possibility of a thyroid problem with your history. Thyroid problems are common at almost any age. First trust your instincts; you are the best expert on YOU. Do as much research as you can ahead of time. It sounds like you already know a lot about the condition. Prepare for the next doctor visit by finding a friend or family member to go with you. I call that person a "health buddy". Let the office staff know you are coming to discuss your many unexplained symptoms and concerns about your thyroid. List all your questions and concerns, including the blood tests that you want (complete hypothyroid profile for starters). You can download a pre-printed office visit form from my website, http://www.drsavard.com/docs/office_visit.pdf, that will help you. Have your health

buddy go in the exam room with you to take notes and give you the courage to speak up. If necessary, tell your doctor that you are very concerned that you may have a problem; you know that the condition runs in families and is common at any age, and that your symptoms are unexplained and may be from an underactive thyroid. Let your doctor know how concerned you are and that without the definitive blood test, you will not be reassured. When you finally get the blood testing done, remember to ask for an original copy of the report. Give your doctor a self-addressed stamped envelope as a reminder to send it to you.

QUESTION: Can my doctor fire me? I ask this because I have an endocrinologist, and at my last visit, I told him that even though he says my thyroid levels are entirely normal, I simply do not feel well. I asked if we could try Armour Thyroid. He laughed at me and said that he would never prescribe "old-fashioned pig thyroid." I said that I really wanted to try the Armour, but he refused. Two days later, I received a formal letter in the mail saying that I needed to find another endocrinologist. Can he do this? What should I do? - Taylor

ANSWER: It sounds like you may want to find another doctor as well. Good family doctors are trained to manage thyroid disease too and your family doctor may be willing to give Armour Thyroid a try. If you come to them prepared and knowledgeable on the subject, even suggesting a possible dose, it will be a big help. As to your current endocrinologist - yes, doctors can stop caring for a patient if they believe that there is a problem in the relationship that would hinder their future care. They must give patients advance notice and recommendations about who else is available. They must give you copies of your medical records as well. It sounds like your doctor is threatened by your challenging questions and believes that for thyroid disease the blood test tells all. You obviously know and deserve better. Go for it!

Hope this information helps.

Warm regards,

Marie Savard, MD

We're happy to announce, we've upgraded our website by adding "Ask DrSavard" Insider's Secrets, where you can ask your questions and tell your stories.
<http://www.drsavard.com/askdrsavard.htm>

Be sure to visit us at <http://www.drsavard.com> to check out upcoming events, press clips, forms to download and so much more.

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