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Waiting for the doctor... and waiting and waiting

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Many Empowered Patient readers complain about long waits at their doctors' offices
- Among helpful strategies: complain in a letter, schedule smartly, find another doctor
- Ideal Medical Practices Project lists practices that try to be on time

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VIDEO

By Elizabeth Cohen
CNN Medical Correspondent

TEXT SIZE

To kill time in the obstetrician's waiting room, Lora Jacobsen and her husband, Dustin, discuss names for their future child. Then they read old parenting magazines left in the waiting room. As the minutes tick by -- 30 then 45 then more than 60 -- they play games and check e-mail on their cell phones.



Dustin and Lora Jacobsen (with Maya) endured long waits at their OB's office but chose to stay with the practice.

"One day I got so bored I took a video of myself circling around in the chair," says Dustin, who posted the video and [blogged](#) about his wait.

"Really, what else are you going to do?"

His daughter Maya recently celebrated her first birthday, but Jacobsen, who lives in Leawood, Kansas, can still recall in vivid detail how maddening it was to spend so much time, month after month, waiting to see the doctor -- and he isn't the only one seething at the doctor's office. Others have posted videos of their long waits, like one woman who documents her three-hour wait in an exam room, and [this man](#) who declares, "This sucks. I hate doctors' offices."

Long waits are also a common complaint on our weekly Empowered Patient "sound-offs."

"Why has it become routine to make patients wait two to three hours to be seen?" asked one Empowered Patient reader.

"First, you wait in the main waiting area, then the nurse takes you into a small room, takes your vitals, and you are left in a holding pattern for another hour. You are treated rudely if you even dare to utter a complaint."

"Am I seriously supposed to believe that every single one of my doctors have so many 'emergencies' during the day that they are forced to be late seeing me?" asked another Empowered Patient reader. "Get real. It's called over-booking."

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One patient got so mad he even sued his doctor for being late -- and won \$250 in small claims court. By being four hours late, Aristotelis Belavilas says, his physician was giving the message that "I'm God and you're not and I do whatever I want."

It's probably fair to say none of us ever wants to sit so long in a doctor's waiting room that we resort to filing a lawsuit or videotaping ourselves. But there are strategies you can use to try and prevent frustrating waits.

[Learn how to avoid long waits at the doctor's office](#) »

1. Stage a revolt

"I ended up waiting two hours to see my gynecologist once, and I just went nuts," says Joanna Lipari, who lives in Santa Monica, California. "I'm a New York Italian, and we don't go well for this kind of stuff. I was so irritated that I gathered together the other eight ladies in the room and joked, 'Let's stage a revolt.'"

The other women took her seriously, and wrote letters to the doctor. "I told her she's a wonderful doctor, but this really wasn't cool. I told her it was inconvenient, uncomfortable and spoke badly for an otherwise exceptional medical practice," says Lipari. "I was trying to change her behavior, and it worked. They changed the way they scheduled appointments."

Lipari, a psychologist who herself works in a large medical practice, says sometimes doctors don't even realize how long their patients have been waiting. She adds that her [gynecologist](#) still is late sometimes



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A letter from you might be the wake-up call your doctor needs, Dr. L. Gordon Moore, a family practice doctor in Seattle, Washington. "We've seen hundreds of practices turn things around," says Moore, who's on the faculty of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, which has some of these "improvement stories" listed on their Web site.

2. Ditch your doctor

Ditch your doctor and try one on [this map](#) from the Ideal Medical Practices Project. Moore is the director and says the physicians on this map are working towards being on time for their patients.

Unfortunately, there's a limited number of doctors on this site, but you can always ask your friends if they have a doctor who doesn't make them wait.

3. Don't wait more than 15 minutes

When you're in the waiting room, speak up sooner rather than later. "After 15 minutes, max, ask the receptionist what's happening and if you've been forgotten," Moore says.

4. Be a smart scheduler

Sean Kelley has diabetes and spends more than his fair share of time in doctors' waiting rooms. In a [recent blog](#) for Health magazine, he offered these scheduling tips:

- Book the first appointment in the morning, or the first appointment after lunch
- Ask the scheduler to book you on the lightest day of the week (Kelley says for some reason his doctor's office is nearly empty on Wednesdays).
- Avoid school holidays if your doctor or dentist sees kids.

For some more scheduling strategies from Lipari, read her [blog](#).

Health Library

- [MayoClinic.com: Health library](#)

dragging luggage behind them and they're always cute," Kelley says. "They can see the doctor whenever they want. How'd they get the keys to the kingdom?"

5. Shut up and wait

This was the Jacobsens' decision. They liked their obstetrician and didn't want to switch in the middle of her pregnancy.

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During my third pregnancy, I made the same decision. I had several ridiculously long waits for my obstetrician, and learned to bring a good book and my laptop computer.

To their credit, during one three-hour-long wait, a nurse came out and apologized, explaining the doctor had run to the hospital to deliver a baby. Not wanting to incur the wrath of a roomful of hungry pregnant women, she brought us granola bars and bottles of water. I forgave them instantly, and went to him again for baby number four.

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CNN's Tanika Gray and Jennifer Smith contributed to this report

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