How to Keep a Symptom Diary That Helps Your Clinician

Health · about 18 minutes · 2026-11-12

A practical 32-step guide to a useful health record: decide what the diary is for, choose a format a clinician can read, write one complete entry, keep it consistent and private, and bring it to an appointment in a form that saves time.

Decide What the Diary Is For

1. **Write one sentence on why you are keeping a record**
   Write one sentence on why you are keeping a record.
2. **Ask the clinic what format they prefer, if you can**
   Ask the clinic what format they prefer, if you can.
3. **Set a review date rather than an open-ended commitment**
   Set a review date rather than an open-ended commitment.
4. **Choose the one or two things you will record**
   Choose the one or two things you will record.
5. **Decide what an entry looks like when you are tired**
   Decide what an entry looks like when you are tired.
6. **Agree that the diary is observation, not interpretation**
   Agree that the diary is observation, not interpretation.

Choose a Format a Clinician Can Read

7. **Use one notebook, one table or one official form**
   Use one notebook, one table or one official form.
8. **Put the same fields in the same order every time**
   Put the same fields in the same order every time.
9. **Write the date in a form nobody can misread**
   Write the date in a form nobody can misread.
10. **Use plain words and short lines**
    Use plain words and short lines.
11. **Leave space for a one-line summary at the end of each week**
    Leave space for a one-line summary at the end of each week.
12. **Photograph or copy the page before the appointment**
    Photograph or copy the page before the appointment.

Write One Useful Entry

13. **Record the date and the time it was noticed**
    Record the date and the time it was noticed.
14. **Describe what you noticed, not what you concluded**
    Describe what you noticed, not what you concluded.

15. **Note the context in one short line**

    Note the context in one short line.

16. **Record any medicine or product exactly as labelled**

    Record any medicine or product exactly as labelled.

17. **Use measurements only if you were asked to**

    Use measurements only if you were asked to.

18. **Mark uncertainty honestly**

    Mark uncertainty honestly.

19. **Keep the entry to five lines or fewer**

    Keep the entry to five lines or fewer.

Keep It Consistent and Private

20. **Attach entries to something that already happens**

    Attach entries to something that already happens.

21. **Use the minimum version on a difficult day**

    Use the minimum version on a difficult day.

22. **Do not edit earlier entries later**

    Do not edit earlier entries later.

23. **Keep the notebook somewhere private but findable**

    Keep the notebook somewhere private but findable.

24. **Be deliberate about any phone or cloud copy**

    Be deliberate about any phone or cloud copy.

25. **Keep the diary separate from self-diagnosis**

    Keep the diary separate from self-diagnosis.

26. **Seek care promptly for severe, sudden or worrying symptoms**

    Seek care promptly for severe, sudden or worrying symptoms.

Bring It to the Appointment

27. **Write three lines at the front: purpose, period, question**

    Write three lines at the front: purpose, period, question.

28. **Mark the two or three entries that matter most**

    Mark the two or three entries that matter most.

29. **Bring the medicine or product information you were asked about**

    Bring the medicine or product information you were asked about.

30. **Let the clinician read and ask, rather than narrating everything**

    Let the clinician read and ask, rather than narrating everything.

31. **Note the advice and any new instructions immediately**

    Note the advice and any new instructions immediately.

32. **Decide whether to continue, pause or stop the diary**

    Decide whether to continue, pause or stop the diary.

Sources

1. MedlinePlus — NIH health information
   https://medlineplus.gov/
2. NHS — Live Well
   https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/
3. NHS — health and care
   https://www.nhs.uk/
4. WebMD — health information
   https://www.webmd.com/
5. American Psychological Association
   https://www.apa.org/
6. NHLBI — High Blood Pressure
   https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/high-blood-pressure
7. NCBI — National Library of Medicine
   https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/

Written as a checklist from https://www.howcompass.com/how-to/How-to-Keep-a-Symptom-Diary-That-Helps-Your-Clinician. Corrections: https: