

German at the doctor

— BEIM ARZT

The basic German phrases you need at the doctor are Schmerzen (pain), Termin (appointment) and Rezept (prescription).

Saying “I have pain” can mislead the doctor. In German you need to say where, since when and what kind.

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01 00:10

Right now: three sentences for when you walk in

⚡ SHORTCUT You can say you are in pain in two ways: **with a noun** — Ich habe Kopfschmerzen — or **with a verb** — Mir tut der Kopf weh. On the verb route **the person is in the dative**: mir, ihm, meiner Mutter.

The first person you speak to at the practice is not the doctor but **the person at reception**. They ask for three things: your name, your date of birth and **die Versichertenkarte** — your insurance card. If you hold out the card before they ask, half of the conversation is already over.

WHAT THE STAFF SAYS	WHAT IT MEANS	WHAT YOU SAY
Ihre Versichertenkarte , bitte .	Your insurance card , please .	Bitte schön . — hand over the card
Waren Sie schon mal bei uns?	Have you been to us before?	Nein , ich bin neu hier .
Ihr Geburtsdatum , bitte?	Your date of birth?	Der zwölfte Mai neunzehnhundertneunzig .
Bitte füllen Sie den Bogen aus .	Please fill in this form .	Ich verstehe das Formular nicht ganz . Können Sie mir helfen?
Nehmen Sie bitte im Wartezimmer Platz .	Please take a seat in the waiting room .	Danke . — Sie werden aufgerufen = your name will be called

The form you fill in on your first visit is called **der Anamnesebogen**: past illnesses, operations, medication you take regularly, allergies. Leave a word you don't know blank and **ask the doctor** — ticking the wrong box is worse than leaving it empty.

When you book by phone the pattern is always the same: **Guten Tag, mein Name ist ... Ich hätte gern einen Termin.** The first question back is almost always **Worum geht es denn?** — “What is it about?” Keep your answer to one sentence: **Ich habe seit einer Woche Rückenschmerzen.**

- ① On the phone people talk fast and cut in. Memorise two sentences and you are fine: **Können Sie das bitte langsamer sagen?** and **Können Sie das bitte wiederholen?** Confirm before you hang up: **Also am Dienstag um neun Uhr zwanzig, richtig?**

02 01:00

You already do this in English

In English, it is not *you* that hurts — it is the **body part**. You say “my head hurts”, not “I hurt my head”. German does **exactly the same thing** with **weh tun**: the body part is the subject, and you stand at the side as a dative.

ENGLISH	WHO IS THE SUBJECT	GERMAN
My head hurts .	the head — not me	Mir tut der Kopf weh .
My feet hurt .	the feet — plural	Mir tun die Füße weh .
My son's stomach hurts .	the stomach — not the child	Meinem Sohn tut der Bauch weh .
I hurt . (meaning : a body part aches)	not how it works	~~Ich tue weh .~~ — doesn't exist in German either

The verb agrees with **the body part**: one body part is **tut**, several are **tun**. In English “my feet hurt” hides the plural in the noun; German shows it on the verb too — this single letter is what makes you sound like a native.

The same logic works for the other ways of feeling ill. Just as English says “I feel sick” but German treats it like something happening *to* you, German puts the person in the dative with **mir**:

- ① Careful: **Ich bin heiß** does not mean “I have a fever” or “I’m hot” as in warm — people understand something completely different. Physical feelings are always built with **mir ist**

03 02:00

Where, since when, what kind

The doctor does not want a story. They want **three pieces of information**, and once you give them the examination gets on track: **wo** — where, **seit wann** — since when, **wie** — what kind of pain.

BODY PART	THE “...SCHMERZEN” FORM	IN A SENTENCE
der Kopf — head	Kopfschmerzen	Ich habe seit gestern Kopfschmerzen .
der Hals — throat	Halsschmerzen	Ich habe Halsschmerzen und kann kaum schlucken .
der Bauch — stomach , belly	Bauchschmerzen	Mir tut der Bauch weh .
der Rücken — back	Rückenschmerzen	Ich habe Schmerzen im unteren Rücken .
der Zahn — tooth	Zahnschmerzen	Ich habe starke Zahnschmerzen .

BODY PART	THE “...SCHMERZEN” FORM	IN A SENTENCE
das Ohr — ear	Ohrenschmerzen	Mein linkes Ohr tut weh .
der Magen — stomach	Magenschmerzen	Ich habe Magenschmerzen nach dem Essen .
das Knie — knee	Knieschmerzen	Mein Knie tut weh , wenn ich laufe .
der Fuß — foot	Fußschmerzen works too ; in conversation you mostly hear the pattern next to it	Mir tun die Füße weh .

The pattern is simple: **body part + -schmerzen**. But it does not sound equally natural with every body part. If you are not sure, your way out is ready: **Ich habe Schmerzen im Fuß / in der Schulter / im Arm**. This sentence works **with every body part**.

Since when: you say it with **seit** and the **present tense** — because the pain is still going on, German does not use a past tense here. (English uses “I have had ... for three days”; German simply says “I have ... since three days”.)

- **seit heute Morgen** — since this morning
- **seit gestern** — since yesterday
- **seit drei Tagen** — for three days (*dative plural: **Tagen***)
- **seit einer Woche** — for a week
- **seit ungefähr zwei Monaten** — for about two months

What kind of pain: this is what the doctor really wants to know, because the diagnosis often comes from the *kind* of pain. Five adjectives are enough:

GERMAN	MEANING	EXAMPLE SENTENCE
stechend	stabbing	Der Schmerz ist stechend .
dumpf	dull , heavy	Es ist ein dumpfer Schmerz .
ziehend	pulling , dragging	Es zieht bis ins Bein .
brennend	burning	Es brennt beim Wasserlassen .
pochend	throbbing	Der Kopf pocht .

If they ask how bad it is, people use a scale: **Wie stark sind die Schmerzen auf einer Skala von eins bis zehn?** Your answer can be a single phrase — **Etwa sieben.** Or use the ready-made adjectives: **leicht** (mild) · **stark** (severe) · **unerträglich** (unbearable).

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04 03:10

What the doctor will ask — and reflexive verbs

The questions in an examination are **almost fixed**. Once you have read the list, what you hear in the room stops being a surprise.

DOCTOR	MEANING	YOUR ANSWER
Was fehlt Ihnen?	literally “what is missing for you” — “what’s wrong?”	Ich habe seit drei Tagen Halsschmerzen .
Wo tut es weh?	Where does it hurt?	Hier , im unteren Rücken .
Seit wann haben Sie die Beschwerden?	How long have you had the symptoms?	Seit ungefähr einer Woche .
Haben Sie Fieber?	Do you have a fever?	Ja , gestern hatte ich 38 ,5 .
Nehmen Sie Medikamente?	Are you taking any medication?	Nein , im Moment nicht .

Make a note of **die Beschwerden**: doctors often use this instead of “pain”, and it is **always plural**. It means “complaints, symptoms” — pain, nausea, tiredness, all of it.

DOCTOR	MEANING	YOUR ANSWER
Sind Sie gegen etwas allergisch?	Are you allergic to anything?	Ja , gegen Penicillin .
Tut das weh , wenn ich hier drücke?	Does it hurt when I press here?	Ja , genau da . / Nein , das geht .
Machen Sie bitte den Oberkörper frei .	Please take off your top .	no answer needed — you just do it
Atmen Sie tief ein ... und aus .	Breathe in deeply ... and out .	no answer needed — you just do it

Most of the verbs in this room are **reflexive**. English often leaves the “myself” out (“I caught a cold”, “I hurt my knee”), but German says it out loud with a separate word — **mich, sich**.

VERB	IN A SENTENCE	ENGLISH
sich fühlen	Wie fühlen Sie sich? — Ich fühle mich schwach.	How do you feel? — I feel weak.
sich verletzen	Ich habe mich am Knie verletzt.	I hurt my knee.
sich erkälten	Ich habe mich erkältet.	I caught a cold.
sich übergeben	Ich habe mich zweimal übergeben.	I was sick twice.
sich ausruhen	Sie müssen sich ausruhen.	You need to rest.
sich hinlegen	Legen Sie sich bitte hin.	Please lie down.
sich krankmelden	Ich muss mich krankmelden.	I have to call in sick.

The pronoun changes with the person: **ich** → **mich** • **du** → **dich** • **er/sie** → **sich** • **wir** → **uns** • **Sie** → **sich**. Because the doctor addresses you as **Sie**, the form you will hear most in the room is **sich**.

✓ Wie fühlen Sie sich heute?

How are you feeling today?

✓ Ich fühle mich seit gestern besser, aber ich bin noch schwach.

I have felt better since yesterday, but I'm still weak.

05 04:20

Two places where people go wrong



TRAP 1

Making yourself the subject of weh tun

This is the most common mistake and it really confuses the doctor. With **weh tun**, **the thing that hurts is the subject**, and you are the dative pronoun.

✗ ~~Ich tue~~ Kopf weh.

Word for word from “I hurt my head” — there is no such sentence in German.

✗ ~~Mich~~ tut der Kopf weh.

Right verb, wrong case. It has to be dative, not accusative.

✓ **Mir** tut der Kopf weh.

My head hurts.

✓ Ich **habe** Kopfschmerzen.

Same meaning, the noun route. Use this whenever you are unsure.

Do **not mix the two routes**: there is no such thing as ~~Ich habe Kopfschmerzen weh~~. It is either **haben + ... schmerzen** or **dative + tut ... weh**.



TRAP 2

Slipping into the past with seit

English says “I **had** a fever for three days” or “I have had a fever for three days”. German stays in the present tense if the pain is **still going on**. And **seit** takes the dative: plural nouns get an **-n** at the end.

✗ **Ich ~~hatte~~ seit drei Tagen Fieber.**

This means “it’s over now” — the doctor will plan treatment accordingly.

✗ **Ich habe seit ~~drei Tage~~ Fieber.**

Right time, wrong case: seit + dative.

✓ **Ich ~~habe~~ seit drei Tagen Fieber.**

I have had a fever for three days — and it’s still going on.

NOMINATIVE	WITH SEIT	NOTE
drei Tage	seit drei Tagen	dative plural -n
zwei Wochen	seit zwei Wochen	already ends in -n
eine Woche	seit einer Woche	die → der/einer
ein Monat	seit einem Monat	der → dem/einem

- ① One more small distinction: **Ich bin krank** and **Ich habe mich krankgemeldet** are not the same thing. The first is a state, the second is an **official notification to your employer**. Simply telling your boss “I’m ill” is not enough; you have to report it.

06 05:20

The part nobody tells you: Hausarzt first, then Facharzt

The reflex many people bring from home is: knee hurts, go to the orthopaedist; stomach hurts, go to the internist. In Germany the system runs **through one door**, and that door is called **der Hausarzt** — your family doctor.

- **Hausarzt** = first stop. Your file is kept there, they write the referrals, they issue the sick note.
- **Facharzt** = specialist: **Orthopäde** • **Hautarzt** • **HNO** (ear-nose-throat) • **Neurologe** • **Kardiologe**.
- Legally you can go straight to a specialist — but the practice will ask its first question on the phone: **Haben Sie eine Überweisung?**
- A **Überweisung** and the appointment queue are different things; if your Hausarzt’s note says “this case cannot wait”, you may get an earlier slot.
- The ones people usually go to directly: **Zahnarzt** • **Augenarzt** • **Frauenarzt** • **Kinderarzt**.

There is an upside for you too: your Hausarzt is **the only person who knows your file**. When your German is not enough, this is the person who will help you most, because they know you and do not rush. So one of the first things to do after moving to Germany is: **find a Hausarzt and register** — before you get ill.

The second thing nobody says: **who to go to, and when**. In Germany the emergency room really is for emergencies; if you need a doctor in the evening or at the weekend there is a separate line.

SITUATION	WHERE	GERMAN NAME
Danger to life	112	der Notruf
Evenings / weekends , but not an emergency-room case	116117	der ärztliche Bereitschaftsdienst
You can't get an appointment	116117	die Terminservicestelle
No appointment , same day	the practice's open hours	die offene Sprechstunde

Look at the sign on the door: **Sprechzeiten** = consultation hours, **Telefonzeiten** = hours when the phone is answered. In most places the two are **different**, and nobody picks up outside phone hours.

- ① A small detail, but it surprises people: the person at reception is not a nurse; the job is called **MFA — Medizinische Fachangestellte**. Calling them **Schwester** is an outdated habit; **Entschuldigung ...** or **Frau ...** with their surname is right everywhere.

07 06:30

Which paper on the way out: Überweisung · Rezept · Krankschreibung

The examination is over, and the doctor hands you something — or doesn't. **Asking for the right word** is your job here — if you don't ask, some papers won't appear on their own.



TRAP 3

Taking a prescription to your boss

All three are “paper from the doctor”, which is why people mix them up. But **the three go to three different places**: the referral to the specialist, the prescription to the pharmacy, the sick note to your employer.

✗ Ich brauche ein ~~Rezept~~ für meinen Chef.

A prescription is for medicine — your boss ends up with a piece of paper that is no use to him.

✓ Ich brauche eine **Krankschreibung** für meinen Arbeitgeber.

I need a sick note for my employer.

✓ Wie lange bin ich krankgeschrieben?

How long am I signed off sick?

The official name of the sick note is **die Arbeitsunfähigkeitsbescheinigung**; everyone just says **AU**. Today the note goes **electronically** to your insurance (**eAU**), and you get a copy too — getting that copy to your employer is **your responsibility**. The older generation still says **der gelbe Schein** (the yellow slip); the paper may no longer be yellow, but the name stuck.

When you need a note depends on your employment contract: some employers want one from day one. Look at your contract once, so you don't have to do it on the morning you are ill. And when you are ill, **tell them first**: **Ich bin krank und kann heute nicht kommen. Ich gehe zum Arzt und schicke Ihnen die Krankmeldung.**

At the pharmacy the conversation is short: **Ich möchte dieses Rezept einlösen.** — “I'd like to redeem this prescription.” If the prescription is loaded onto your card, it gets even shorter: **Ich habe ein E-Rezept.** and you hand over the card.

ON THE BOX / LEAFLET	MEANING	IN PRACTICE
Einnahme · einnehmen	taking · to take medicine	medicine is taken with einnehmen , not nehmen
Dosierung : 1-0-1	dose : 1 in the morning , 0 at noon , 1 in the evening	three numbers = morning , noon , evening
vor / nach dem Essen	before / after eating	zu den Mahlzeiten = with meals
auf nüchternen Magen	on an empty stomach	usually in the morning , before breakfast
mit ausreichend Flüssigkeit	with plenty of liquid	unzerkaut = without chewing
Nebenwirkungen	side effects	Gegenanzeigen = cases where it must not be used
rezeptpflichtig · rezeptfrei	prescription-only · over the counter	You can ask : Ist das rezeptfrei?

The last sentence at the end of every medicine ad in Germany comes from here too: **Bei Risiken und Nebenwirkungen lesen Sie die Packungsbeilage und fragen Sie Ihren Arzt oder Apotheker.** Once you have understood it, you never miss it again.

Two more useful questions at the pharmacy: **Haben Sie etwas gegen Husten?** — “Do you have something for a cough?” and **Wie oft muss ich das nehmen?** — “How often do I have to take this?” The answer will probably come in this pattern: **Dreimal täglich eine Tablette, nach dem Essen.**

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08 07:30

What to do this week

You need doctor sentences not in an exam but **at the door** — so you build a reflex rather than memorise. Five minutes a day:

- Write your own “three minutes”: **Ich habe seit ... Schmerzen im/in der ... Der Schmerz ist ...** Fill the three gaps with your own situation and read it aloud.
- Build the same complaint **in two ways**: once **Ich habe ...schmerzen**, once **Mir tut ... weh**. Check that you put the dative pronoun in correctly.
- Pick five body parts and write one sentence for each — notice that with plurals the verb becomes **tun**: **Mir tun die Augen weh**.
- Phone rehearsal: **Guten Tag, mein Name ist ... Ich hätte gern einen Termin. — Worum geht es? — Ich habe seit ...** Say this dialogue out loud three times.
- Pick up a medicine box at home and translate the text on it. Write down three words you don’t know — the same words will turn up on the next box.

- ① The next step is Dative verbs: **weh tun** is not alone — **helfen • gefallen • passen • schmecken** work on the same logic. For the moments when you get stuck while speaking, there are the right ways to say “I didn’t understand”.

09 BUILD

Build the sentence yourself

Tap the words and put them in order. This is the hardest part of German — and there are no options to pick from, **you** build it.

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

TIPS

Know this before the test

The core of the topic in three lines, then the mistakes people make most often.

01

Pain is expressed with the dative

Mir tut der Kopf weh — the thing that hurts is the subject, the person in pain is the dative. If more than one body part hurts, the verb becomes plural: **Mir tun die Füße weh.**

Mir tut der Kopf weh.

02

State phrases have no subject

Mir ist schlecht/kalt/schwindelig — the person who feels it stands in the dative. Saying **Ich bin schlecht** means “I am a bad person”; don’t break the pattern.

Mir ist schlecht.

03

Duration: seit + dative

How long a complaint has lasted is asked and told with **seit**; what follows is dative plural: **seit drei Tagen.**

Ich habe seit drei Tagen Fieber.

04

Referral and sick note are different papers

To see a specialist you get **die Überweisung** (referral); to give to your employer you get **die Krankschreibung / AU** (sick note). Don’t mix them up.

eine Überweisung zum Orthopäden

✗ ~~Ich bin schlecht.~~

✓ **Mir ist schlecht.**

The state phrase needs the dative; the version with a subject says you are a bad person.

✗ ~~Mir tut die Füße weh.~~

✓ **Mir tun die Füße weh.**

The thing that hurts is the subject; if it is plural, the verb is plural too: **tun.**

✗ ~~Ich habe seit drei Tage Fieber.~~

✓ Ich habe seit drei Tagen Fieber.

seit takes the dative; the dative plural gets -n: Tagen.

✗ ~~I took the Überweisung to my employer.~~

✓ You take the Krankschreibung (AU) to your employer.

An Überweisung is a referral between doctors; the paper for the employer is the AU.

09 08:20

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

Finish the topic: take the full test

13 questions · timed · exam style · 60% finishes the topic



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