

and your doctor should agree on exactly what will be done during each step of your care.

Who will be taking care of you, how long the treatment will last, and how you should feel.

Understand that more tests and medications may not always be better. Ask your doctor what a new test or medication is likely to achieve.

Obtain copies of your medical records from previous hospitalizations and share them with your health care team. This will give them a more complete picture of your health history.

Don't be afraid to seek a second opinion. If you are unsure about the nature of your illness and the best treatment, consult with one or two additional specialists. The more information you have about the options available to you, the more confident you will be in the decisions you make.

Try to speak with others who have undergone the procedure you are considering. These individuals can help you prepare for the days and weeks ahead. They also can tell you what to expect and what worked best for them as they recovered.



UP

Help Prevent Errors in Your Care

Health care organizations across the country are working to make health care safety a priority. You, as the patient, can also play a vital role in making your care safe by becoming an active, involved and informed member of your health care team.

According to an Institute of Medicine report, medical errors kill up to 98,000 people annually. That makes medical errors a leading cause of death in America.

The “*Speak Up*” program, sponsored by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, urges patients to get involved in their own care. Such efforts to increase consumer awareness and involvement are supported by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. This initiative provides simple advice on how you, as the patient, can make your care a positive experience. After all, research shows that patients who take part in decisions about their health care are more likely to have better outcomes.

To prevent health care errors, patients are urged to . . .

SPEAK UP

Speak up if you have questions or concerns, and if you don't understand, ask again. It's your body and you have a right to know.

- i Your health is too important to worry about being embarrassed if you don't understand something that your doctor, nurse or other health care professional tells you.
- i Don't be afraid to ask about safety. If you're having surgery, for example, ask the doctor to mark the area that is

Don't be afraid to tell the nurse or the doctor if you think you are about to receive the wrong medication.

Ask your nurse or doctor if something doesn't seem quite right.

Ask health care workers to introduce themselves when they enter your room and look for their identification badges. A new mother, for example, should know the name of the person to whom she is handing her baby. If you're unsure,

ask whether your care givers have washed their hands. Handwashing is the most important way to prevent the spread of infections. Don't be afraid to gently remind a doctor or nurse to do this.

Ask what time of day you normally receive a medication.

Be sure you are familiar with the operation of any equipment that is being used in your care. If you will be using oxygen at home, do not smoke or allow anyone to be near you while oxygen is in use.

Ask a trusted family member or friend to be your advocate.

Your advocate can ask questions that you may not think of when you are under stress.

Ask this person to stay with you, even overnight, when you are in the hospital. Ask about the purpose of the medication and ask for written information about it, including its brand and generic names. Also inquire about the side effects of the medication.

Ask if you do not recognize a medication, verify that it is for you. Ask about oral medications before swallowing, and check the contents of bags of intravenous (IV) fluids. If you

Pay attention to the care you are receiving. Make sure you know what you are getting. If it doesn't happen, bring this to the attention of your nurse or doctor.

• Make sure your nurse or doctor confirms your identity; that is, checks your wristband or asks your name, before he or she administers any medication or treatment.

Educate yourself about your diagnosis, the medical tests you are undergoing, and your treatment plan.

• Ask your doctor about the specialized training and experience that qualifies him or her to treat your illness (and be sure to ask the same questions of those physicians to whom he or she refers you).
• If you are hospitalized. You will be able to rest more comfortably and your advocate can help to make sure you get the right medications and treatments.

• Your advocate can also help remember answers to questions you have asked, and speak up for you if you cannot.

• Make sure this person understands your preferences for care and your wishes concerning resuscitation and life support.

• Review consents for treatment with your advocate before you sign them and make sure you both understand exactly what you are agreeing to.
• If you are not well enough to do this, ask your advocate to do this for you.

• If you are given an IV, ask the nurse how long it should take for the liquid to "run out." Tell the nurse if it does not seem to be dripping properly (that it is too fast or too slow).

• Gather information about your condition. Good sources include your doctor, your library, respected websites and support groups.

• Write down important facts your doctor tells you, so that you can look for additional information later. And ask your doctor if he or she has any written information you can keep.

• Thoroughly read all medical forms and make sure you understand them before you sign anything. If you don't understand, ask your doctor or nurse to explain them.

• Make sure your advocate understands the type of care you will need when you get home. Your advocate should know what to look for if your condition is getting worse, and whom to call for help.

Know what medications you take and why you take them. Medication errors are the most common health care mistakes.

• Whenever you are going to receive a new medication, tell your doctors and nurses about allergies you have, or negative reactions you have had to medications in the past.

• If you are taking multiple medications, ask your doctor or pharmacist if it is safe to take those medications together. This holds true for vitamins, herbal supplements, and over-the-counter drugs also.

pharmacist may not be able to either.
ask about the health care organization's experience in
treating your type of illness. How frequently do they
perform the procedure you need and what specialized care
they provide in helping patients get well?

care organization that has undergone a rigorous on-site

- i If you have more than one hospital or other facility to
choose from, ask your doctor which one offers the best care
for your condition.
- i Before you leave the hospital or other facility, ask about

follow-up care and make sure that you understand all of the
instructions.

- i Go to Quality check at www.jcaho.org to find out whether
your hospital or other health care organization is accredited.