



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

Help Prevent Errors in Your Care

Ambulatory Care



Everyone has a role in making health care safe. That includes doctors, nurses and other health care professionals. Health care organizations all across the country are working to make health care safe. You can make your care safer by being an active, involved and informed member of your health care team.

The "Speak Up" program is sponsored by The Joint Commission. They agree that patients should be involved in their own health care. These efforts to increase consumer awareness and involvement are also supported by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

This program gives simple advice on how you can make health care a good experience. Research shows that patients who take part in decisions about their own health care are more likely to get better faster. To help prevent health care mistakes, patients are urged to "Speak Up."

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

- Your health is important. Do not be embarrassed if you don't understand what your doctor, nurse or other health care professional tells you.
- Don't be afraid to ask about safety. If you're having surgery, ask the doctor to mark the area that is to be operated on.
- Don't be afraid to tell the nurse or the doctor if you think you are about to get the wrong medicine or treatment.
- Don't be afraid to tell a health care professional if you think he or she has confused you with another patient.

Pay attention to the care you get. Always make sure you get the right treatments and medicines by the right health care professionals. Don't assume anything.

- Tell your nurse or doctor if something doesn't seem right.
- Health care workers should introduce themselves. Look for their identification (ID) badges.
- Notice whether your caregivers have washed their hands. Hand washing is the most important way to prevent infection. Don't be afraid to remind a doctor or nurse to do this.
- Make sure your nurse or doctor checks your ID. Make sure they do this before giving you medicine or treatment.

Educate yourself about your illness. Learn about the medical tests you will get. Learn about your care plan.

- Ask your doctor about the special training and experience that qualifies him or her to treat your illness.
- Find out about your condition. Good places to get information are from your doctor, your library, respected websites and support groups.
- Write down information that your doctor tells you. Ask your doctor if he or she has any written information you can keep.
- Read all medical forms. Make sure you understand them before you sign them. If you don't understand ask your doctor or nurse to explain them.
- Make sure you know how to work any equipment that is being used in your care. If you use oxygen at home, do not smoke or let anyone smoke near you.

Ask a trusted family member or friend to be your advocate (advisor or supporter).

- Your advocate can ask questions that you may not think about when you are stressed.
- Ask this person to be with you during your treatment or operation. Your advocate can help make sure you get the right medicines and treatment.
- Your advocate can remember answers to questions you have asked. They can speak up for you when you cannot speak up for yourself.
- Make sure this person understands the care you want. Make sure they know what you want done about life support and other life-saving efforts.
- Read the consents for treatment with your advocate before you sign them. Make sure you both understand exactly what you are agreeing to.
- Make sure your advocate understands the care you will need when you get home. Your advocate should know what to look for if your condition gets worse. They should also know who to call for help.

Know what medicines you take. Know why you take them. Medicine errors are the most common health care mistakes.

- Ask why you should take the medicine. Ask for written information about it. Find out its brand and generic names. Ask about the side effects of all medicines.
- If you do not recognize a medicine make sure that it is for you. Ask about medicines that you take by mouth before you swallow them. Read the labels on the bags of intravenous (IV) fluids. If you're not well enough to do this ask your advocate to do it.
- 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 seems to be dripping too fast or too slow.
- When you get a new medicine tell your doctors and nurses about your allergies. Tell them about any bad reactions you have had to other medicines.
- If you take a lot of medicines ask your doctor or pharmacist if it is safe to take them together. Do the same thing with vitamins, herbs, and over-the-counter drugs.
- Make sure you can read the handwriting on prescriptions written by your doctor. If you can't read it the pharmacist may not be able to either. Ask somebody at the doctor's office to print the prescription.

Use an ambulatory care center, surgery center, office-based surgery practice, imaging center or other type of health care organization that has been carefully checked out. For example, The Joint Commission visits ambulatory care centers to see if they meet The Joint Commission's quality standards.

- Ask if the organization has taken care of people with your illness or condition. How often do they perform the treatment you need? What special care do they give to help patients get well?
- If you have more than one ambulatory care center to choose from ask your doctor which one offers the best care for you.

- Before you leave the facility ask about follow-up care. Make sure that you understand all of the instructions.
- Go to Quality Check at www.qualitycheck.org to find out if your ambulatory care center is "accredited." Accredited means that the center works by rules that make sure that patient safety and quality standards are followed.

Participate in all decisions about your treatment. You are the center of the health care team.

- You and your doctor should agree on exactly what will be done during each step of your care.
- Know who will be taking care of you. Find out how long the treatment will last. Know how you should feel.
- Understand that more treatments, tests or medicines may not always be better for you. Ask your doctor how a new treatment, test or medicine will help.
- Keep copies of your medical records. Share them with your health care team. This will give them better information about your health history.
- Don't be afraid to ask for a second opinion. If you are not sure about the best treatment for your condition, talk to one or two more doctors. The more information you have about all the kinds of treatment available to you the better you will feel about the decisions made.
- Ask to speak with others who have had the same treatment or operation. They may help you prepare for the days and weeks ahead. They may be able to tell you what to expect and what worked best for them.