

Speak Up: Help Prevent Health Care Errors and Falls



Allina Health

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

- Your health is very important. Do not worry about being embarrassed if you don't understand something that your doctor, nurse or other health care professional tells you.
- If you do not understand because you speak another language, ask for someone who speaks your language. You have the right to get free help from someone who speaks your language.
- 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.
- 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're getting 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.
- Expect health care workers to introduce themselves. Look for their identification (ID) badges. A new mother should know the person to whom she hands her baby. If you don't know who the person is, ask for the ID.
- Notice whether your care givers have washed their hands. Hand washing is the most important way to prevent infections. Don't be afraid to remind a doctor or nurse to do this.
- Know what time of the day you normally get medicine. If you don't get it, tell your nurse or doctor.

- Make sure your nurse or doctor checks your ID. Make sure he or she checks your wristband or asks your name before he or she gives you your medicine or treatment.

Educate yourself about your illness. Learn about the medical tests you get, and your treatment plan.

- Ask your doctor about special training and experience that qualifies him or her to treat your illness.
- Look for information about your condition. Good places to get that information are from your doctor, your library, respected websites (such as the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC]) and support groups.
- Write down important facts your doctor tells you. Ask your doctor if he or she has any written information you can keep.
- 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 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 stay with you, even overnight, when you are in the hospital. You will be able to rest better. Your advocate can help make sure you get the right medicines and treatments.

- Your advocate can also help remember answers to questions you have asked. He or she can write down information you need to remember or speak up for you when you cannot speak up for yourself.
- Make sure this person understands the kind of care you want. Make sure he or she knows what you want done about life support and other life-saving efforts if you are unconscious and not likely to get better.
- Your advocate should be someone who can communicate and work well with health care professionals. This will help you get the best care.
- Your advocate should know who your health care proxy decision-maker is. A proxy is a person you choose to sign a legal document so he or she can make decisions about your health care when you are not able to make your own decisions. Your advocate may be your proxy. He or she should know this ahead of time.
- Go over the consents for treatment with your advocate before you sign them. Make sure you both understand exactly to what you are about to agree.
- 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. He or she should also know whom to call for help.

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

- Ask about why you should take the medicine. Ask for written information about it, including its brand and generic names. Also ask about the side effects of all medicines.

- If you do not recognize a medicine, double-check that it is for you. Ask about medicines that you are to take by mouth before you swallow them. Read the contents of 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 doesn't seem to be dripping right (too fast or too slow).
- Whenever you get a new medicine, tell your doctors and nurses about allergies you have, or negative reactions you have had to other medicines.
- If you are taking a lot of medicines, be sure to ask your doctor or pharmacist if it is safe to take those medicines together. Do the same for vitamins, herbs and over-the-counter medicines.
- Make sure you can read the handwriting on any 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, if necessary.
- Carry an up-to-date list of the medicines you are taking in your wallet or purse. Write down how much you take and when you take each medicine. Review your medicine list with your health care providers.


Use a hospital, clinic, surgery center, or other type of health care organization that has been carefully checked out. For example, The Joint Commission visits hospitals to see if they are meeting The Joint Commission's quality standards.

- Ask about the health care organization's experience in taking care of people with your type of illness. How often do they perform the procedure you need? What special care do they provide to help patients get well?

- If you have more than one hospital to choose from, ask your doctor which one has the best care for your condition.
- Before you leave the hospital or other facility, ask about follow-up care and make sure that you understand all of the instructions.
- Go to Quality Check at qualitycheck.org to find out whether your hospital or other health care organization is “accredited.” Accredited means that the hospital or health care organization works by the 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. Know how long the treatment will last. Know how you should feel.
- Understand that more tests or medicines may not always be better for you. Ask your doctor how a new test or medicine will help.
- Keep copies of your medical records from previous hospital stays and share them with your health care team. This will give them better information about your health history.
- Don't be afraid to seek a second opinion. If you are unsure about the best treatment for your illness, talk with one or two additional doctors. The more information that you have about all kinds of treatment available to you, the better you will feel about the decision made.

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- Ask your doctor to recommend a support group you can join to help deal with your condition. People in these groups 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.
 - Talk to your doctor and family about your wishes for resuscitation and other life-saving actions.

Ten Tips to Help Prevent Falls While You are in the Hospital

Remember: Certain medicines, general weakness, and new surroundings during your hospital stay can increase your risk of falling.

1. Use the call light when you need help.
2. Ask the nursing staff for help to and from the bathroom. This is very important if you are unsteady. The call light in the bathroom may be located on the wall.
3. For your safety, a member of the nursing staff may stay with you in the bathroom.
4. If you take medicines that cause you to go to the bathroom often, ask for help when you need to get up. Consider using a commode or urinal.
5. Some medicines may cause you to feel dizzy or sleepy. Take your time getting out of the bed or chair. Sit at the edge of the bed for a few seconds before you get up.
6. Wear nonslip footwear or slippers when you are up.
7. Wear your eyeglasses and/or hearing aid(s) when you are awake.
8. Walkers and canes can provide support. Other items do not. Do not lean on the bedside table, furniture, IV pole or other items to steady yourself.
9. Ask a member of your health care team to place the call light, phone and personal items within your reach before he or she leaves the room.
10. Tell a member of the nursing staff if you have any concerns about your safety.

For Family and Friends

The nurse identifies patients who may be at risk for falling with red slippers and/or special signs.

Please speak up about safety concerns to the nursing staff. This includes information about the risk of falling, or a recent history of a fall.

Patient safety and comfort are important to the health care team. Family and friends can also help. Please read the information in this booklet so you can remind your family member or friend of the 10 tips to prevent falls.

You can also do the following.

- Make sure the call light, phone and personal items are within easy reach of the patient before you leave the room.
- Call the nurse if the patient is weak or lightheaded.
- Consider staying with the patient if he or she is confused or at a high risk of falling.
- Call the nurse before leaving the patient if he or she is confused.
- Remind the patient to ask the nursing staff for help when getting up.

If you have any questions, please ask a member of your health care team.

*This booklet provides simple advice on how you,
as a 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.*

Information adapted from The Joint Commission.



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