**Infections**
Ask all healthcare providers who have direct contact with you whether they have washed their hands. Hand hygiene is the single most important way to prevent the spread of infections, because most infections can be prevented by handwashing.
- Ask your healthcare providers about cleaning, disinfecting, and sterilizing equipment.
- Wash your hands before handling food, after using the bathroom or sneezing or coughing, changing a diaper, touching pets, or taking care of someone sick.

**Hospitalization**
Talk with your doctor about your options if you need hospital care.
- Ask which hospital has the best care, good nurse staffing levels, and best results for your condition.
- Write down the name of each healthcare provider who gives you direct care and ask what they are going to do.
- If a healthcare worker wants to give you a medicine or treatment you are not expecting, ask your doctor first.
- Before you leave the hospital, ask about follow-up care and be sure you understand the instructions.

**Surgery**
Make sure you understand what will happen if you need surgery.
- Ask who is in charge of your care, exactly what will be done, how long it will take, what will happen afterwards, and how long recovery will take.
- Make sure you, your doctor, and your surgeon all agree on exactly what will be done during the operation.
- Follow instructions after surgery to prevent adverse events like urinary tract infections, lung infections, and blood clots.

Adapted from: *Medical Errors: The Scope of the Problem*. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Rockville, MD.
www.ahrq.gov/qual/errback.htm;

*Five Steps to Safer Healthcare*. Interagency Coordination Task Force.
www.ahrq.gov/consumer/5steps.htm;

*20 Tips to Help Prevent Medical Errors*. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Rockville, MD.
www.ahrq.gov/consumer/20tips.htm

**References**


Patient Safety

Scope of the Problem: An Epidemic of Errors

Patient safety is one of the nation’s most pressing healthcare challenges. Medical errors are a leading cause of death and injury. An Institute of Medicine (IOM) report estimates that as many as 44,000–98,000 people die in U.S. hospitals each year as the result of lapses in patient safety. This means that more people die from medical errors than from motor vehicle accidents, breast cancer, or AIDS. Preventable healthcare-related injuries cost the economy $17–29 billion annually.

The Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology, Inc. (APIC), government agencies, purchasers of group healthcare, and healthcare providers are working together to make the U.S. healthcare system safer for patients.

You have a right to question anyone involved in your healthcare. It’s okay to ask questions and expect answers you can understand.

What are Medical Errors?

Medical errors happen when something that was planned as part of medical care doesn’t work out or when the wrong plan was used in the first place. Medical errors can occur anywhere in the healthcare system:

- hospitals
- ambulatory clinics
- outpatient surgery centers
- medical offices
- nursing homes
- pharmacies
- patients’ homes

Errors can involve:

- infections, such as hospital-acquired infections
- medicines, such as the wrong prescription or dosage
- surgery, such as amputation of the wrong limb
- diagnostic tests and reports, such as failure to act on abnormal results
- medical equipment, such as defibrillators with dead batteries
- treatments and therapies, such as giving a patient a blood transfusion of an incorrect blood type, or failing to give a patient a salt-free meal

Errors can happen with even the most routine tasks, for example, when caregivers do not wash their hands before providing patient care. Research shows that the majority of medical errors can be prevented.

What Can You Do?

Be involved. The single most important way you can help to prevent errors is to be an active member of your healthcare team. Research shows that patients who are more involved with their care tend to get better results.

- Choose a doctor you feel comfortable talking to about your health.
- Take part in every decision about your healthcare.
- Speak up if you have questions or concerns.
- Take a relative or friend with you to help ask questions and understand the answers.

Diagnosis

Get the results of any test or diagnostic procedure.

- Ask when you can expect the results; if reports will be in person, by phone, or by mail; and what they mean for your care.
- Don’t assume that no news is good news—follow-up.

Medications

Make sure all of your doctors know about all of the medicines you are taking including prescription, over-the-counter medicines, and dietary supplements like vitamins and herbs.

- Keep a list of all the medicines you take.
- Bring all of your medicines with you to your doctor at least once a year.
- Make sure you know what each medicine is for, how and when to take it, and any side effects you could experience, and possible drug-to-drug interactions.
- Make sure that your doctor knows about any drug allergies or reactions you have had to medicines or anesthesia.