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Healthy Insights

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How to Prevent Medical Errors

Experts agree that taking an active role in your own healthcare is critical to preventing medical errors. Evidence suggests that patients who actively participate in their own treatment decisions are more likely to be satisfied with the care they receive.

Here are a few ways you can make sure that you have the input you need in your own healthcare decision-making.

Medications safety

Let your physician know about all the medicines you take. This includes prescription medicines, over-the-counter medications, vitamins, non-traditional supplements and diet pills.

Bring all your medicines to your doctor visits. In this way your doctor can evaluate the safety of the medications you take as well as guard against potentially dangerous drug interactions.

Make sure your physician knows about allergies and adverse reactions you have to specific medications.

Always check if you're able to read the medication instructions written by your doctors.



Make sure to ask questions about any medication you take:

- What is the medicine for?
- How am I supposed to take it and for how long?
- What side effects are likely? What do I do if they occur?
- Is this medicine safe to take with other medicines or dietary supplements I am taking?
- What food, drink, or activities should I avoid while taking this medicine?

When you go to the pharmacy to pick up your medicine, make sure to ask the pharmacist if this is the medication your doctor prescribed. If you're at all confused about the labels on a medication, make sure the pharmacist clarifies dosage and frequency. Ask your pharmacist for the best device to measure your liquid medicine.

Ask for written information about the side effects your medicine could cause.

Hospital safety

If you are in a hospital, don't hesitate to ask health care workers whether they have washed their hands. Handwashing is essential in preventing hospital-acquired infections.



When you are being discharged from the hospital, ask your doctor to explain the treatment plan you will follow at home. It is very important to know whether you should continue to take medications you were taking prior to your hospital stay—this helps assure you don't risk another hospital stay.

If you are having surgery, make sure that you, your doctor, and your surgeon all agree on exactly what will be done.

Having surgery at the wrong site (for example, operating on the left knee instead of the right) is rare. But even once is too often. The good news is that wrong-site surgery is 100% preventable.

If you have a choice, choose a hospital where many patients have had the procedure or surgery you need. Research shows that patients tend to have better results when they are treated in hospitals that have a great deal of experience with their condition.



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Communicating with your doctors

Speak up if you have questions or concerns. You have a right to question anyone who is involved with your care.

Make sure that someone, such as your primary care doctor, coordinates your care. This is especially important if you have many health problems or are in the hospital. Make sure that all your doctors have your important health information. Do not assume that everyone has all the information they need.

Ask a family member or friend to go to appointments with you. Even if you do not need help now, you might need it later.

Know that "more" is not always better. It is a good idea to find out why a test or treatment is needed and how it can help you. You could be better off without it. If you have a test, do not assume that no news is good news. Ask how and when you will get the results.

Adapted from "20 Tips To Help Prevent Medical Errors: Patient Fact Sheet" Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Rockville, MD.

<https://www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers/care-planning/errors/20tips/index.htm>

IPRO Healthy Insights is authored by Dr. Clare Bradley, IPRO's Senior Vice President/Chief Medical Officer, and a nationally recognized public health advocate.

IPRO is a non-profit organization that works with government agencies, providers and patients to measure and improve healthcare for all. For over 35 years we've made creative use of clinical expertise, emerging technology and data solutions to make the healthcare system work better.