

Protect Yourself

No Matter Where... Be in Charge of Your Care



Topics

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Medical errors are a leading cause of death and injury. It has been reported that about 195,000 patients a year die in U.S. hospitals due to medical errors that could have been prevented. This brochure lists important tips on what you can do to help protect yourself from medical errors.

1. What are Medical Errors?

Medical errors occur when a planned 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 health care system, including:

- Hospitals and clinics.
- Outpatient surgery centers.
- Doctors' and other healthcare providers' offices.
- Nursing homes.
- Pharmacies.
- Patients' homes.

Examples of medical errors are:

- A wrong medicine is prescribed or taken. Too much or not enough medicine is taken. Harmful medication interactions occur.
- A patient is given blood that doesn't match his or her own type.
- Diagnostic tests are not ordered. Test results are misinterpreted or action is not taken on abnormal test results.
- The wrong diagnosis is made. This can lead to an incorrect choice of therapy.
- Equipment failure occurs.

- Mistakes are made before, during, and after surgery.
- Guidelines are not followed to prevent infections.

Most errors result from problems created by today's complex health care system. But errors also happen when doctors and their patients have problems communicating.

2. What Can You Do?

The single most important way you can help to prevent errors is to be an active member of your health care team.

Do this **A.S.A.P.**

- Ask questions.
- Speak up for your needs.
- Acquire information.
- Protect yourself.

Take an active role in every decision about your health care. Research shows that patients



who are more involved with their care tend to get better results. If necessary, have a family member or friend oversee your care. Specific tips, based on scientific evidence about what works best, follow.

3. Medicine Tips

- **Make sure that all of your doctors know about everything you are taking. This includes prescription and over-the-counter medicines, and dietary supplements, such as vitamins and herbs.** Keep a complete and up-to-date list of all the medicines you take or print one from your www.myhealth.va.gov Web site. If you are not already registered for this, see how to do so on the last panel of this brochure.

At least once a year, show all of your medicines and supplements, in their original containers, to your doctor. Doing this can help you and your doctor talk about them and find out if there are any problems. It can also help your doctor keep your records up-to-date, which can help you get better quality care.

- **Make sure each doctor who prescribes medicine for you knows about any allergies and adverse reactions you have had to medicines and to foods, such as shrimp.** This can help you avoid getting a medicine that can harm you. See that things that you are allergic to are written clearly in your medical records and on your hospital chart. Wear a medical ID tag that lists your health conditions and allergies.



- **When your doctor writes a prescription for you, make sure you can read it.** If you can't read your doctor's handwriting, your pharmacist might not be able to either. Ask your doctor for one you can read.
- **Ask for information about your medicines in terms you can understand—both when your medicines are prescribed and when you receive them.**
 - What is the medicine for?
 - How am I supposed to take it, and for how long? Speak up if it is hard for you to swallow pills. Some medicines are not effective if they are crushed before swallowed. Ask your doctor to write a prescription for medicine in a form you are better able to take.
 - 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 pick up your medicine from the pharmacy, ask, "Is this the medicine that my doctor prescribed?"** If you get medicines refilled through your VA Rx Refill service, call your Pharmacy Service or your healthcare provider for questions and concerns. A study by the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Allied Health Sciences found that 88 percent of medicine errors involved the wrong drug or the wrong dose.

- **If you have any questions about the directions on your medicine labels, ask.**



Medicine

labels can be hard to understand. For example, ask if "four doses daily" means taking a dose every 6 hours around the clock or just during regular waking hours.

- **Ask your pharmacist for the best device to measure your liquid medicine. Also, ask questions if you're not sure how to use it.** Research shows that many people do not understand the right way to measure liquid medicines. For example, many use household teaspoons, which often do not hold a true teaspoon of liquid. Special devices, like marked syringes, help people to measure the right dose. Being told how to use the devices helps even more.
- **Ask for written information about the side effects your medicine could cause.** It's hard to remember everything your doctor tells you. Written information about medicines can help you recognize problem side effects and then give that information to their doctor or pharmacist.

4. Hospital Tips

- **Ask all health care workers who have direct contact with you if they have washed or sanitized their hands.** Hand washing and hand sanitizing are important ways to prevent the spread of infections in hospitals.
- **When you are being discharged from the hospital, ask for an explanation and written instructions for the treatment plan you will use at home.** This includes learning about your medicines and finding out when you can get back to your regular activities. Research shows that at discharge time, doctors think their patients understand more than they really do about what they should or should not do when they return home.

5. Surgery Tips

- **If you are having surgery, make sure that you, your doctor, and your surgeon all agree and are clear on exactly what will be done.** Doing 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 percent preventable. Surgeons at VA hospitals outline or trace the area on the surgery site. The surgeon then initials the area. At a non-VA hospital, sign your initials directly on the site to be operated on.



6. Other Steps You Can Take

- **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 personal doctor, is in charge of your care.** This is especially important if you have many health problems or are in a hospital.
- **Make sure that all health professionals involved in your care have important health information about you.** Do not assume that everyone knows everything they need to.
- **Ask a family member or friend to be there with you and to be your advocate (someone who can help get things done and speak up for you if you can't).** Even if you think you don't need help now, you might need it later.
- **If you have a test or procedure, don't assume that no news is good news.** Ask about the results and find out what the results mean for you.

- **Learn about your condition and treatments by asking your doctor and nurse and by using other reliable sources.** You can get treatment recommendations based on the latest scientific evidence from the National Guidelines Clearinghouse™ at www.guideline.gov.
- **Get reliable, secure Veterans health information, from:** www.myhealth.va.gov. Complete the "In Person Authentication (IPA)" process. It's easy, quick and of course, free. All you need to do is go to your VA Medical Center or VA clinic and tell a VA staff/volunteer or contact person that you want to complete the In-Person Authentication process.
- **The In Person Authentication (IPA)** is used to verify your user identity for information and tools you need to improve and help protect your health. You'll be able to see and reorder your prescriptions from your home or clinic kiosk. Coming soon, you will be able to schedule appointments, laboratory tests, and X-rays. Next year, you will be able to send secure messages to your health care team.



You may have this question:

Why do they keep asking me for two forms of ID, like my full name, my social security number, my birth date, or my drivers license when the staff knows me?



Answer:

It is because errors can be made. We have discovered there are other people that have your same name, first and last, and the same middle initial, possibly even the same middle name. They may be older or younger and by using more than one form of identification, only your electronic medical record can be pulled up. This is for your privacy and your safety.

Information in this brochure was adapted from: 20 Tips to Help Prevent Medical Errors. Patient Fact Sheet. AHRQ Publication No. 00-PO38, February 2000. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Rockville, MD. www.ahrq.gov/consumer/20tips.htm