



Health Information and Education Center

Preventing Medical Errors

Medical errors are one of the nation's leading causes of death and injury. A recent report by the Institute of Medicine estimates that as many as 44,000 to 98,000 people die in the U.S. hospitals each year as the result of medical errors that from motor vehicle accidents, breast cancer, or AIDS.

Errors can involve medicines, surgery, diagnosis, equipment or lab reports. They can happen during even the most routine tasks. 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. *Here are 20 Tips to help prevent medical errors.*

1. The single most important way you can help prevent errors is to be an active member of the health care team. That means taking part in every decision about you or your child's health care. Research shows that patients who are more involved with their care tend to get better results.
2. Make sure that all of the doctors know about everything you or your child is taking. This includes prescriptions medicines, over-the-counter medicines and dietary supplements such as vitamins and herbs. At least once a year, take all of your or your child's medicines and supplements to your doctor "Brown bagging" the medicines can help you and your doctor talk about them and find out if there are any problems.
3. Make sure your or your child's doctor knows about any allergies adverse reactions you or your child has had to medicines.
4. When your doctor writes a prescription, make sure you can read it.
5. Ask for information about you or your child's medicines in terms you can understand- both when the medicines are being prescribed and when you receive them. What is the medicine for? How are you or your child suppose to take it and for how long? What side effects are likely? What are supposed to do if side effects occur? Is this medicine safe to take with other medicines or dietary supplements you or your child is taking? What food and drink or activities should you or your child avoid while taking this medicine?

6. When you pick up your or your child's medicine from the pharmacy ask: Is this the medicine that the doctor prescribed? One study found that 88 percent of medication, wrong drug or the wrong dose.
7. Medication labels can be hard to understand. If you have any questions about the direction on the medication label, ask.
8. Ask your pharmacist for the best device to measure liquid medication, and ask how to use the device.
9. Ask for written information about the side effects the medication could cause. If you know what might happen you will be better prepared if it does-or if something unexpected happens instead.
10. If you have a choice, choose a hospital at which patients have had the procedure or surgery that you or your child needs. 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.
11. If you or your child is in a hospital, consider asking all health care workers who have direct contact with you or your child whether they washed their hands. Hand washing is an important way to prevent the spread of infections in hospitals, yet it is not done regularly or thoroughly enough. A recent study found that when patients checked whether health care workers washed their hands, the workers washed their hands more often and used more soap.
12. When you or your child is being discharged from the hospital, ask the doctor to explain medications, the treatment plan you will use at home, and when you or your child 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.
13. If you or your child is having surgery, make sure that you, the doctor, and the surgeon all agree and are clear on exactly what will be done. Doing surgery at the wrong site is rare, but is 100 percent preventable. The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons urges its members to sign their initials directly on the site to be operated on before surgery.
14. Speak up if you have questions or concerns. You have the right to question anyone who is involved in you or your child's care.

15. Make sure that someone, such as your doctor, is in charge of your or your child's care, especially if you or your child has many health problems or is in the hospital.
16. Make sure that all health professionals involved in your or your child's care have important health information about you or your child. Do not assume that everyone knows everything they need to.
17. If necessary. Ask a family member or friend to be there with you and help you advocate for you or your child.
18. 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 will help.
19. If you or your child has a test, don't assume that no news is good news. Ask about the results.
20. Learn about your or your child's condition and treatment by asking the doctor and nurse and using other reliable sources for example; treatment recommendation based on the latest scientific evidence are available from the National Guidelines Clearinghouse at www.guideline.gov. Ask your doctor if you or your child's treatment is based on the latest evidence.

Adapted from "20 Tips to Help Prevent Medical Errors: Patient Fact Sheet." AHRQ Publication No.00-P038, February 2000. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Rockville, MD www.ahrq.gov/consumer/20tips/htm

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