



Patient Safety Awareness Week

March 10-16 is Patient Safety Awareness Week, an annual initiative to encourage people to learn more about healthcare safety. You may think patient safety is the job of healthcare providers alone, but really everyone can play a part. Be your own best healthcare advocate!

Patient Safety Awareness Week!

How to Help Your Providers Keep You Safe

Naturally you assume the best when you seek healthcare services. You should, in fact, as most healthcare in the U.S. is safe and of good quality. Yet, errors and accidents still happen, and many of them are unintentional and preventable.

Harm to patients can happen in several ways. Medication errors are one of the most common problems that occur in hospital and outpatient settings and can easily happen at home too. A study by Hardeep Singh et al in the *BMJ* estimated that 5 percent of adults who receive outpatient care experience a diagnostic error (a misdiagnosis, a missed diagnosis or a delayed diagnosis). One in 31 hospital patients will develop an infection unrelated to their original reason for being hospitalized per the [Centers for Disease Control](#). Another risk to patient safety is unnecessary testing. Such testing can lead to false positive results and may provide no additional helpful information, often at great expense and worry.

Should you be concerned about seeking care? No! Preventive medicine and care for sudden or chronic illness or injury is essential. But when you go to a provider, *be an active participant in your care*. You can improve your care and decrease the possibility for harm by asking questions about your conditions and medications. Also, inquiring why you are having procedures and what you hope to learn from

the results can minimize unnecessary testing and help build strong relationships with your providers.

Reducing Medication Errors

Medications can work wonders, but if they are taken incorrectly or by the wrong person, they can cause harm and even death. To help reduce mistakes, make sure you know why you take each medication and what the possible side effects are. If you notice anything "off," tell your provider about your symptoms.

Keep a list of your medications (and dosage) handy. Stash a copy in your wallet so it travels with you. If you fill weekly pill boxes, refer to your list to make sure you have the right pills in each slot. Be sure to update your medication list if prescriptions are added, stopped or changed. Some people use their smart phone camera to take pictures of prescription bottles. Here are other tips for avoiding errors:

- Take medications as prescribed. The dosage and time (of day or on an empty/full stomach) are important details. If you are unsure, don't hesitate to ask for clear instructions. If the cost of prescriptions is the reason you don't take medications, let your provider know. Sometimes there are less expensive, but equally effective options available. Also, many drug companies offer financial assistance programs.

Do I Really Need That?

Even primary care doctors think their patients receive too much medical care, according to a report published by B.E. Sirovich et al in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. Unnecessary testing and treatment can harm patients. For example, unneeded antibiotics increase the risk for developing antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Also, the use of CT (computed tomography) scans has soared in the last 20 years. CT scans expose patients to levels of radiation linked to increasing cancer rates and do not necessarily add valuable information.

How can you avoid testing, medications or other services that offer marginal value? Ask your provider these questions:

- How will this test, procedure, medicine help? What are the potential results and how will they affect the next steps?
- What are the risks and side effects?
- Are there simpler, safer options?
- What if I choose to wait or choose not to have the test or take the medicine?
- How much does it cost, and does insurance usually cover it?

To learn more about unnecessary testing, read our newsletters, [Shared Healthcare Decision-Making](#) and [Wasteful Medical Spending](#).

The information contained in this newsletter is for general, educational purposes. It should not be considered a replacement for consultation with your healthcare provider. If you have concerns about your health, please contact your healthcare provider.

- If given medications in the hospital, ask the nurse what each is, the dosage and what it is for (if you don't know).
- Don't self-medicate. It can be unsafe to take medications left-over from a previous illness or from a family member or friend. They could interact negatively with something else you take or may not be appropriate for your current condition, symptoms, health status, weight, etc.
- Store all medications out of the reach of pets, children and others who could be harmed.
- If a family member or friend has asked for your support during a hospitalization or other procedure, you can ask about medications they receive. Writing down the names and dosage will help the patient keep orderly medical records. This is especially important if any adverse reactions occur so future mistakes can be avoided.
- Offer assistance to the elderly and disabled persons in your life who may need help taking their medicines safely.

Learn more by reading our newsletter, [Medication Errors at Home](#).

Misdiagnosis, Missed Diagnosis or Delayed Diagnosis

Do you have control over diagnostic errors? Most people don't think that's their job. But in fact, keeping good medical records, taking notes and tracking test results, can keep your providers on their toes. Let's say you don't receive test results when expected. Do you assume no news is good news or do you follow-up? You follow-up! In our complicated medical system, details can easily fall through the cracks but important information about your health is not something you want to miss.

If you keep a medical notebook with the dates of surgeries, procedures,

diagnoses, medication lists and other important details, you can develop a sixth sense about your health. If you think a diagnosis doesn't quite add up, speak up. Ask what else it could be, what can you expect, what to do if symptoms worsen, and if it safe to "watch and wait"? You can also request a second opinion if you receive a serious diagnosis, have unresolved symptoms or don't feel confident about the diagnosis or provider.

Avoiding Infection

Hospitals are the place you go to get well, right? True, but sadly there is a risk of being exposed to infection while there. Surgical wounds and IV or catheter sites are easy spots for infections to start. Maintaining good hygiene practices can reduce the risk. If you notice a provider about to touch these areas without first washing their hands, ask them to! Wash your own hands regularly, especially after using the toilet. If you have a catheter or drainage tube that's become loose or dislodged, let your nurse know so it can be fixed or removed as soon as possible to prevent infection.

Ask your visitors to wash their hands each time they enter your room. If potential visitors are sick, ask them not to come until they are well. If you are given antibiotics for an infection, be sure to take the full course as directed; they are designed to continue fighting infection after you begin to feel better.

While patient safety measures in doctor's offices and hospitals have made significant progress in keeping patients safe, you can also do your part. Remember that KnovaSolutions can assist you with any health challenge you and your family are facing. Don't hesitate to contact us with any questions about patient safety. We can help you identify your risks given your specific set of health concerns. Call us at **800/355-0885**, Monday-Friday, 8 am-8 pm, MT.