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How to Stay Safe in a Hospital

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Going Into the Hospital? Take Precautions for Your Own Safety

You would think the hospital is among the safest of places, with all those doctors and nurses around. But there are a lot of sick people around, too, and sometimes those doctors and nurses become too busy and make mistakes. It turns out that hospitals aren't always so safe after all.

About ten years ago the Institute of Medicine published a report called "To Err is Human" which said that 98,000 Americans died each year from medical errors. It was headline news at the time, but things have not improved. In fact, last year Hearst Newspapers, in its national investigation "Dead by Mistake," reported that now 200,000 Americans a year die from preventable medical errors and hospital infections. The problem is getting worse!

To make sure you come out in better shape than you went in, there are a number of things you can do to protect yourself.

Take charge

This is your life, and your medical care. The doctors and nurses are the experts, but you still should protect yourself by taking control and fully understanding what is happening and why.

You're not likely to be at your best in the hospital, so one of the smartest things you can do is appoint a family member or someone else you trust to be there with you, and help you watch over your care.

Keep Track of Medications

It's not unusual for a hospital patient to be getting ten or more different medications. Rather than trusting that you are getting the right drugs in the right doses at the right times, keep a drug list with you at all times. It's a good idea to keep a medical history with you also, so each caregiver has access to it before treating you.

Prevent Infection

Infections are a huge problem in hospitals, especially with the emergence of so-called “superbugs” such as MRSA. The best precaution you can take is to make sure that caregivers who treat you wash their hands. If you don’t see them do it, ask them. Bring your own antibacterial wipes with you, and wipe down high-touch surfaces such as tabletops, phones and doorknobs.

Take Precautions Before Surgery

If you are going to have surgery, it’s a good idea to try to schedule it for times when the hospital will be well-staffed. Weekends and nights might not be the best time for you to receive the attention you want. If it’s possible you might need a blood transfusion, you could bank some of your own blood, so you know you have a safe supply. To ensure you get the right surgery, you can have the surgeon sign or initial the site on your body to be operated on. Know your risk level for heart attack or blood clots, and discuss with your doctor whether you may need beta-blocker or blood thinner.

Communicate

Good communication is a key to good care while you are in the hospital. You should know who is in charge of your care, and don’t be afraid to ask questions about anything you don’t understand. Don’t wait until you wake up in the middle of the night in discomfort to talk to your doctor about a pain management plan. And certainly don’t wait until you go home to talk about a recovery plan.

It’s always a good idea to be polite and considerate of the people who are providing your care, but at the same time you should be willing to be assertive enough to make sure you receive the care you deserve.

Information

Check out your doctor or hospital. Ask friends, family, and co-workers about the credentials of each doctor. Use public information to research the track records of your doctor and hospital.

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You can utilize the following information sources:

<http://www.doh.state.fl.us/>

(Doctors/Nurses/Staff)

(License verification)

www.floir.com/liability

(database Doctor/Hospital claims)

www2.miami-dadeclerk.com/civil

(Doctor/Hospital Lawsuit Search Miami-Dade)

Also, be sure your doctors and hospitals are skilled in the field you need. Many doctors and hospitals have fine reputations, but they may not be skilled or capable of treating your condition. For example, a knee expert may not be the right provider to operate on your elbow or neck. Be careful to select the health care provider that is right for your needs.