

QualityCounts™ For Employees – April 2010

How to Avoid Being the Victim of Hospital Mistakes

In today's complex health care system, medical errors in hospitals and clinics are all too common. Errors may occur from the most routine level of care—serving a patient on a low-sodium diet a high-sodium meal — to the most complex — performing surgery on the wrong body part or the wrong side of the body. In fact, the Joint Commission, a group which accredits hospitals, found that wrong-site, wrong-side and wrong-patient procedures occur more than forty times each week in the United States.

How can you and your family avoid being the victim of these mistakes? The Agency for Health Care Research and Quality (AHRQ) found that many errors are the result of poor communication. Communicating with your doctors and staying informed about your care is important at every step of your care. AHRQ recommends:

Before your procedure or appointment:

- Make sure the people treating you know who are you and why you are here. State your full name, your date of birth, and your reason for your visit.
- Check your hospital ID band to make sure all the information is correct.
- Know what is in your medical chart. Ask your doctors or care providers to confirm what is in your chart with any test or procedure they are about to do.
- Make sure **all** your doctors know **all** medications you are taking, including over-the-counter medications and herbal supplements. Bring your medication bottles with you, or an updated list.
- Make sure you tell all your providers about any allergies or adverse reactions to medications.
- If you are having surgery, ask to have the area marked in pen, with the surgeon present. This will help avoid wrong-side or wrong-body part surgical errors.

During your care:

- Ask the doctors and nurses treating you if they have washed their hands.
- Find out who is in charge of your care and how he or she will communicate your important health information to members of your care team.
- Make sure each provider knows your full name, birth date, and checks your ID badge before all procedures.
- Ask a family member or friend to be there with you and serve as an informed advocate in case you can't speak for yourself.
- Know that more is not always better. Ask for the risks and benefits of each test or procedure your doctor wants to do.

After your visit:

- Ask your doctor to explain your discharge plan in detail. Learn about any medications you'll be taking and when you can resume normal activities.
- If the doctor writes you a prescription, make sure you can read it. If you can't, the pharmacist probably can't either.
- Ask for written information about the side effects of medications and how to take them. Make sure the label on your prescription bottle matches what your doctor ordered.
- Learn about your health condition and follow up with your providers if you have questions.

In short, the best way to avoid hospital errors is to be informed, and to make sure your providers are informed as well. Be straightforward and clear, and make sure your doctor knows everything they need to in order to provide the care you need. When choosing a hospital, learn about that hospital's record in terms of procedure you are having and overall care quality. The Alliance resource [QualityCounts™](#) offers a series of reports on quality and cost of care at area facilities. These reports are a valuable tool in choosing a health care provider that will be safe and effective for you and your family.