

## Avoiding Medical Errors: Proactive Guidelines for Patient Safety

The following guidelines can help patients and their families understand their risks and take steps to become an active member of the health care team and protect themselves from a preventable patient safety event.

### 1. Take time to research objective quality information about your local hospitals.

If you are going to the hospital in a non-emergency situation, take the time to research objective quality information about that hospital. HealthGrades ([www.HealthGrades.com](http://www.HealthGrades.com)) provides objective quality and patient safety information about hospitals, as do many states and the federal government at [www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov](http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov).

If you see information that concerns you, ask both your doctor and hospital personnel about the information and what steps they are taking to improve their performance as well as what steps they will take to ensure you do not have an adverse event. Do not rely solely on a friend or a physician's recommendation because not all hospitals are the same. We found that if all hospitals were performing at the level of the top hospitals for patient safety:

- 174,358 patient safety events may have been avoided between 2007 and 2009; and
- 20,688 Medicare lives could have been saved during the same time period (*Appendix D*).

### 2. Learn more about your own personal risks.

Learn more about your own personal risks of experiencing a complication or a poor outcome following a procedure or hospitalization. Elderly patients and patients with underlying health conditions are at higher risk for developing an in-hospital complication. Speak to your physician before any procedure to understand your individual risks, what you can do to mitigate those risks, and steps that the physician and hospital will take to accommodate your unique risk profile.

- One in ten Medicare surgical patients died after developing a serious but treatable medical complication following surgery.

### 3. Be your own advocate and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Be your own advocate and ask about safety precautions and protocols.

- We found that 52,127 hospital-acquired bloodstream infections occurred post-operatively or from the use of catheters (*Appendix C*). Know the specific steps your health care providers are taking to prevent these infections if you are undergoing surgery and/or need a catheter.

#### 4. Protect yourself against delirium.

Patients undergoing surgery or being hospitalized are at risk for delirium due to the combination of illness, medications, and a lack of sleep. Patients that develop delirium in the hospital are at increased risk of adverse events such as post-operative hip fractures.

To protect yourself, talk to your physician about your risk and how to adjust your medications to reduce your risk. Also ask your friends and family members to help you by making sure you have access to glasses and hearing aids if you wear them. Sleeping well and getting out of bed with assistance from your health care team as much as possible can also help to combat hospital-acquired delirium.

#### 5. Learn about your condition and know your health care team.

Be sure to ask your health care provider to explain your condition and your medications. You have the right to know what your diagnosis is and the purpose of every medication you are being given. You should also ask for the results of all tests and procedures.

Prior to checking into the hospital, make a list of every medication you take and the dose. Before you leave the hospital, talk to your health care provider about your medications. Make sure you know what medications to take, when to take them, why it is prescribed for you, if there are possible side effects, and are there any medications you should discontinue taking. Write down the name and phone number of the person you can call if you have questions about your medications.

Write down the name of the doctors participating in your care. During a hospitalization, you may see many doctors and this can lead to uncoordinated and fragmented care. Most importantly, make sure you know the primary physician who is coordinating your care among all of the different specialists. Your primary care physician is often a good person for this role.

#### 6. Have a follow-up plan.

Have a follow-up plan. When being discharged from the hospital, have your follow-up appointments scheduled before leaving. Also be sure to have very specific instructions about what to do if your symptoms should change.