



## **SPEAK UP. HELP PREVENT ERRORS IN YOUR CARE**

### ***Speak up if you have questions or concerns, and if you don't understand, ask again.***

- Your health is too important to worry about being embarrassed if you don't understand something that your doctor, nurse or other health care professional tells you.
- Don't be afraid to ask about safety. If you're having surgery, for example, ask the doctor to mark the area that is to be operated on so there is no confusion in the operating room.
- Don't be afraid to speak up if you think you are about to receive the wrong medication.
- Don't hesitate to tell your care giver if you think he has confused you with another patient.

### ***Pay attention. Make sure you're getting the right treatments and medications by the right health care professionals. Don't assume anything.***

- Tell your nurse or doctor if something doesn't seem quite right.
- Expect health care workers to introduce themselves when they enter your room and look for their ID badges.
- Notice whether or not your care givers have washed their hands. Hand washing is the most important way to prevent the spread of infections. Don't be afraid to gently remind your care giver to do this.
- Know what time of day you normally receive a medication. If it doesn't happen, inform your nurse or doctor.
- Make sure your nurse or doctor confirms your identity, that is, checks your wristband or asks your name and birth date, before administering any medication or treatment.

### ***Educate yourself about your diagnosis, the medical tests you are undergoing, and your treatment plan.***

- Gather information about your condition. Good sources include your doctor, the library, Web sites and support groups.
- Write down important facts your doctor tells you so that you can look for additional information later. Ask your doctor if he/she has any written information you can keep.
- Thoroughly read all medical forms and make sure you understand them before you sign anything. If you don't understand something, ask your doctor or nurse to explain it.
- Make sure you are familiar with the operation of any equipment that is being used in your care. If you will be using oxygen at home, for instance, do not smoke or allow anyone to smoke near you while oxygen is in use.

### ***Ask a trusted family member or friend to be your advocate.***

- Your advocate can ask questions that you may not think of while you are under stress.
- Ask this person to stay with you, even overnight, when you are hospitalized. You will be able to rest more comfortably and your advocate can help make sure you get the right medications and treatments.
- Your advocate can also help remember answers to questions you have asked, and speak up for you if you can not.
- Make sure this person understands your preferences for care and your wishes concerning resuscitation and life support.
- Review consents for treatment with your advocate before you sign them and make sure you both understand what you are agreeing to.
- Make sure your advocate understands the care you will need when you get home. Your advocate should know what to look for if your condition is getting worse and who to call for help.

### ***Know what medications you take and why. Medication errors are the most common health care mistakes.***

- Ask about the purpose of the medication and ask for written information about it, including its brand and generic names. Also, inquire about the side effects.
- If you do not recognize a medication, verify that it is for you. Ask about oral medications before swallowing, and read the contents of bags of IV fluids. If you're not well enough to do this, ask your advocate to do this.
- If you are given an IV, ask the nurse how long it should take for the liquid to "run out." Tell the nurse if it doesn't seem to be dripping properly (too fast or too slow).
- Whenever you are going to receive a new medication, tell your doctor and nurse about allergies you have, or negative reactions you have had to medication in the past.
- If you are taking more than one medication, ask your doctor or pharmacist if it is safe to take the medication(s) together. This holds true for vitamins, herbal supplements and over-the-counter drugs, too.



**HOWARD COUNTY  
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***Use a hospital, clinic, surgery center or other health care organization that has undergone a rigorous on-site evaluation against established, state-of-the-art quality and safety standards, such as those provided by the Joint Commission.***

- If you have more than one facility to choose from, ask your doctor which one offers the best care for your condition.
- Before you leave the facility, ask about follow-up care and make sure you understand all of the instructions.
- Go to [www.qualitycheck.org](http://www.qualitycheck.org) to find out whether or not your hospital or other health care organization is accredited.

***Participate in all decisions about your treatment. You are the center of the health care team.***

- You and your doctor should agree on what will be done during each step of your care.
- Know who will be taking care of you, how long the treatment will last and how you should feel.
- More tests or medications may not always be better. Ask your doctor what a new test or medication is likely to achieve.
- Don't be afraid to seek a second opinion. If you are unsure about the nature of your illness and the best treatment, consult with one or two additional specialists.

*The "Speak Up" program, sponsored by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, urges patients to get involved in their care. This initiative provides simple advice on how you, as the patient, can make your care a positive experience. Research shows that patients who take part in decisions about their health care are more likely to have better outcomes.*