

Patient Safety Primer

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Why is patient safety important?

Medical settings can be risky places for patients

Although hospitals, clinics, and doctors' offices take steps to keep patients safe, medical errors can still happen.

- **About 1 in 20 patients gets an infection each year while receiving medical care.**
- An estimated 1.7 million health care associated infections occur each year in hospitals, leading to about 100,000 deaths.
- 125,000 patients were advised during the last decade to be tested for Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, or HIV due to unsafe injection practices by medical staff.
- Patients who contract infections in hospitals are much more likely to be re-admitted.
- Seniors, those with complex chronic conditions, the uninsured, and those who don't speak English well are most at risk.

Common safety issues to keep in mind when visiting the doctor or hospital:

Healthcare-acquired infections (HAIs): HAIs are infections acquired by patients during a hospital visit or other healthcare related appointment. The infection might develop among medical staff and easily be passed on to patients with weakened immune systems or be spread through medical equipment, such as re-used needles, syringes, and saline bags. The three most common types of HAIs are catheter-related bloodstream infections, hospital-acquired pneumonia, and surgical site infections.

Medication errors: These are errors that occur when a patient receives the wrong medication, or when the patient receives the right medication but in the wrong dosage or manner. These are among the most common errors in patient care and can be greatly reduced by both clear communication and a triple-checking of medication information.

Wrong-site surgery: Wrong-site surgery means an operation done on the wrong part of the body or on the wrong person. It can also mean the wrong surgery was performed. While wrong site surgery is incredibly rare, it is estimated that approximately 40 wrong-site surgeries occur each week.

Falls: Researchers estimate that more than 500,000 falls happen each year in US hospitals, resulting in 150,000 injuries. Patients may be at increased risk of falls if they have an impaired memory, muscle weakness, are older than 60, or use a cane or walker to help them walk. Medications may also play a role in increasing a person's risk for a fall.

Readmissions: A readmission is when a patient needs to return to the hospital less than 30 days after being discharged. Many factors can contribute to hospital readmissions, such as poor quality care or a difficult transition between different providers and care settings. Readmissions may also occur if patients are discharged from hospitals too soon, discharged to inappropriate settings, or do not receive adequate information or resources to aid in recovery.

What is being done to address this problem?

At the national level, the US Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services announced its National Patient Safety Initiative in April 2011. The program eventually will reduce payments to medical providers with poor safety records and reward providers for good quality of care. Additionally, in January 2012, the US Department of Health and Human Services released rankings and statistics on hospital-acquired conditions on its **Hospital Compare website**. The site, which also includes information about patient satisfaction and care outcomes, provides detailed data on a facility's safety track record at <http://hospitalcompare.hhs.gov>.

Also in April 2011, the **National Partnership for Patients campaign** launched as a private-public partnership that will work towards safe, more affordable health care for all Americans. The Partnership for Patients brings together leaders of major hospitals, employers, physicians, nurses, and patient advocates, along with state and federal governments, in a shared effort to make hospital care safer, more reliable, and less costly.

In Georgia, more than 290 hospitals, community groups, physician groups and others signed the Partnership for Patients pledge. In the metropolitan Atlanta area alone, approximately 25 hospitals have signed it, including all major health systems and specialty facilities. Statewide, nearly 100 hospitals have signed on the pledge.

What can I do?

There are a few things you can do to stay safe while receiving care.

At the doctor's office

- Know yourself and your medical history
 - ✓ Bring a list of current medications, their dosage and the name of the prescribing doctor with you to doctor appointments. Better yet – keep this list in your wallet or purse in case you are taken to the emergency room.
 - ✓ Know your medical history and have it written down in case of an emergency. Let a family member know where this information is so they are able to find it.
- Make the most of doctor visits
 - ✓ Ask a family member or friend to go to appointments with you. They may remember something either during the visit or after that you may not.
 - ✓ Think about what questions you need to ask before you are in the room with the doctor.
- Ask questions
 - ✓ Be sure you understand what your doctor or nurse is telling you. If something does not make sense or you don't understand a term, speak up.
 - ✓ Additionally, while receiving care, be sure to ask:
 - About your diagnosis: What is it? Why does the doctor believe this?
 - About your treatment: What are your options? What are the benefits and side effects of each option?
 - About any tests: What is it for? When will you know the results?



- About your daily routine: Do you need to make any changes to your diet or exercise regime? Are there particular foods to avoid? Should you get more or less sleep?

At the hospital

- If you have a choice, choose a hospital where many patients have had the procedure or surgery you need. You can do research online at HospitalCompare.HHS.gov, or via the hospital's own website.
- Always pay attention to what is going on
 - ✓ Make sure your name and date of birth are correct on the papers your nurses and doctors have. This will help to ensure that your records aren't mixed up with those of another patient.
 - ✓ If you are able, learn the names of those caring for you when at the hospital. Know who is a part of your care team.
 - ✓ Find out the hospital chain of command. Know that a resident is a doctor in training. Your attending physician may be better able to answer your questions or get an issue resolved. You have the right to speak to the attending physician.
- Learn about your hospital's approach to safety
 - ✓ Do they have a plan to ensure you receive quality, safe care?
 - ✓ Do they take steps to prevent infections, such as proper hand washing, sanitizing re-usable equipment, and following safe injection practices?
 - ✓ Where do you and your family fit into that plan?
- Don't doubt yourself
 - ✓ Always remember that you know your body better than anyone. If you think something is wrong or if you feel a treatment isn't what will work best for you, respectfully speak up.



Upon discharge

- Ask your doctor to explain the treatment plan you will follow at home
 - ✓ Be aware of any community resources available to you, such as an Area Agency on Aging or a program sponsored by your hospital to help ensure a smooth transition home.
- Be safe with your medications
 - ✓ Be sure you can read the prescription your doctor writes.
 - ✓ Always ask questions about any new medications to make sure you know exactly the dosage, what time of day you should take it, whether or not you should have a full stomach, and what its side effects may be.
 - ✓ Find out who you can call if you have any medication questions once you are home.

And, always

- **Don't be afraid to ask your caregiver if they have washed their hands.** Hand washing is one of the most effective means of curbing the spread of hospital infections.
- Don't be afraid to ask your caregiver if he or she takes other steps to prevent the spread of infections, such as sanitizing re-usable equipment and following safe injection practices.
- Make sure you understand what you are being told: Whether it is how to take your medication, the reasons for a particular test, or your discharge instructions; always make sure you fully understand what is going on with your care.

Where I can I get more information?

Hospital Compare website for patient safety data – HospitalCompare.HHS.gov

Partnership for Patients – www.Healthcare.gov/compare/partnership-for-patients

Campaign for Better Care – CampaignForBetterCare.org

National Patient Safety Foundation – NPSF.org

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services – CMS.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – CDC.gov/hai

Empowered Patient Coalition – empoweredpatientcoalition.org

Safe Injection Practices Coalition – oneandonlycampaign.org

Atlanta's Area Agencies on Aging – agewiseconnection.com or call (800) 669-8387

Center for Pan Asian Community Services – iCPACS.org or call (770) 936-0969

Georgia Watch – GeorgiaWatch.org or call (866) 33-WATCH

Urban League of Greater Atlanta – ULGATL.org

Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda – GCPAgenda.org

