

Actively Involved

THE BEST CARE IS SELF-CARE

YOU DESERVE QUALITY HEALTH CARE

Getting quality health care can help you stay healthy and recover faster when you become sick. However, we know that often, people do not get high-quality care. A 2004 study of 12 large U.S. communities found that just over half (54.9 percent) of people were receiving the care they needed.

What exactly is health care quality? We know that quality means different things to different people. Some people think that getting quality health care means seeing the doctor right away, being treated courteously by the doctor's staff, or having the doctor spend a lot of time with them.

While these things are important to all of us, clinical quality of care is even more important. Think of it like this: getting quality health care is like taking your car to a mechanic. The people in the shop can be friendly and listen to your complaints, but the most important thing is whether they fix the problem with your car.

Health care providers, the government, and many other groups are working hard to improve health care quality. You also have a role to play to make sure you and your family members receive the best quality care possible.

How do you know you're receiving quality health care? In general, quality care is when your doctors, nurses and other medical staff are doing their best to:

- ▶ Do the right thing (give you the health care services you need);
- ▶ At the right time (when you need them);
- ▶ In the right way (using the appropriate test or procedure);
- ▶ To achieve the best possible results.



Providing quality health care also means that your health care providers are striking the right balance of services. They do this by:

- ▶ Avoiding underuse (for example, not screening for high blood pressure);
- ▶ Avoiding overuse (for example, performing tests that you don't need).
- ▶ Eliminating misuse (for example, providing medications that may have dangerous interactions).

We would like to think that every doctor, nurse, pharmacist, hospital, and other provider gives high-quality care, but we know this is not always the case. Health care quality can vary widely and for many reasons. The single, most important thing you can do to ensure you get high quality health care is to find and use health information and take an active role in making decisions about your care.

BE ACTIVE: TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR HEALTH CARE

Here are some steps you can take to improve your care:

- ▶ Work together with your doctor and other members of the health care team to make decisions about your care.
- ▶ Be sure to ask questions.
- ▶ Ask your doctor what the scientific evidence has to say about your condition.
- ▶ Do your homework; go online or to the library to find out more information about your condition.
- ▶ Find and use quality information in making health care choices.
- ▶ Be sure the information comes from a reliable source.

Improving health care quality is a team effort, and it is ongoing on many levels. To succeed, every part of the health care system must become involved, including government and nongovernment organizations, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, hospitals, other providers, and you, the patient.



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Choosing Quality Health Care

Here are some tips for making quality a key factor in the health care decisions you make about health plans, doctors, treatments, hospitals, and long-term care.

Look for a health plan that:

- ▶ Has been given high ratings by its members on the things that are important to you.
- ▶ Has the doctors and hospitals you want or need.
- ▶ Provides the benefits (covered services) you need.
- ▶ Provides services where and when you need them.
- ▶ Has a documented history of doing a good job of preventing and treating illness.

Look for a doctor who:

- ▶ Has received high ratings for quality of care.
- ▶ Has the training and experience to meet your needs.
- ▶ Will work with you to make decisions about your health care.

If you become ill, make sure you understand:

- ▶ Your diagnosis.
- ▶ How soon you need to be treated.
- ▶ Your treatment choices, including the benefits and risks of each treatment.
- ▶ How much experience your doctor has in treating your condition.

Look for a hospital that:

- ▶ Is accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO).
- ▶ Is rated highly by the State and by consumer groups or other organizations.
- ▶ Has a lot of experience and success in treating your condition.
- ▶ Monitors quality of care and works to improve quality.

In choosing a nursing home or other long-term care facility, look for one that:

- ▶ Has been found by State agencies and other groups to provide quality care.
- ▶ Provides a level of care—including staff and services—that will meet your needs. 

THE TRUTH ABOUT MEDICAL ERRORS

Medical errors are one of the Nation's leading causes of death and injury. But there is good news: you can learn how to take care of yourself and your loved ones. Included in this article are some things you can do to prevent medical errors and ensure that you receive safe, quality health care.

What Are Medical Errors?

Medical errors happen when something that was planned as a part of medical care or treatment doesn't work out, or when the wrong plan was used in the first place. Medical errors can occur anywhere in the health care system, including at hospitals, in clinics or doctor's offices, at pharmacies and even in patient's homes. Medical errors can happen during even the most routine tasks, such as when a hospital patient on a salt-free diet is given a high-salt meal.

Most errors result from problems created by today's complex health care system. But errors also happen when doctors and their patients have problems communicating. For example, a recent study supported by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) found that doctors often do not do enough to help their patients make informed decisions. Uninvolved and uninformed patients are less likely to accept the doctor's choice of treatment, and are less likely to do what they need to do to make the treatment work.

“You should keep asking questions until you understand what is being diagnosed or treated, and what you need to do to get better.”

Talking With Your Health Care Team

Learning how to communicate and asking questions when you're not clear about something can help you be more actively involved in your own health care decisions and prevent medical errors. Speaking up can help you get the most out of your health care visits and ensure you better quality care.

Here are some examples of questions to ask your health care team. It is not a complete list, as you will probably have many other questions. You should keep asking questions until you understand what is being diagnosed or treated, and what you need to do to get better.

To understand your diagnosis, you can ask:

- ▶ What is wrong with me?
- ▶ What do I need to do to get better?
- ▶ Where can I get more information about my condition?

If you need a lab test, an x-ray, or another kind of test, ask your doctor:

- ▶ How will the test be done?
- ▶ How accurate will the results be?
- ▶ What are the benefits and risks of the test?
- ▶ When and how will I receive the results?
- ▶ What should I do if I don't receive the results?

If you receive a prescription for a new medicine, be sure to ask:

- ▶ What is the name of the medicine?
- ▶ What is it supposed to do?
- ▶ When should I take the medicine, and how much should I take?
- ▶ Does the medicine have any side effects?

If you need surgery, you can ask your doctor:

- ▶ What kind of operation do I need?
- ▶ Why do I need an operation?
- ▶ What are the benefits and risks of the operation?
- ▶ How long will it take to recover?
- ▶ What will happen if I don't have the operation?
- ▶ Are there any other treatments I could have instead of an operation?
- ▶ Where can I get a second opinion? **AI**



BE YOUR OWN HEALTH CARE ADVOCATE

Know that "more" is not always better. It is a good idea to find out why a test or treatment is needed and how it can help you. You could be better off without it.

If you have a test, don't assume that no news is good news. Ask about the results.

Learn about your condition and treatments by asking your doctor and nurse and by using other reliable sources. For example, treatment recommendations based on the latest scientific evidence are available from the National Guidelines Clearinghouse™ at www.guideline.gov. Ask your doctor if your treatment is based on the latest evidence.

You can also ask a family member or friend to be there with you and to be your advocate (someone who can help get things done and speak up for you if you can't). Even if you think you don't need help now, you might need it later.

The information contained in this medical self-care newsletter can be used to increase your personal awareness of how to manage minor health issues. If you have any questions or concerns about medical issues impacting you or your family, always contact your health care provider.



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Sources:

National Institutes of Health (www.nih.gov), Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (www.aHRQ.gov)



ABOUT **The Wellness Council Of America (WELCOA)**

WELCOA was established as a national not-for-profit organization in the mid 1980s through the efforts of a number of forward-thinking business and health leaders. Today, WELCOA has become one of the most respected resources for workplace wellness in America. With a membership in excess of 4,000 organizations, WELCOA is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of all working Americans. Located in America's heartland, WELCOA makes its national headquarters in one of America's healthiest business communities—Omaha, NE.