



by Susan L. Comer

# Patient Safety 101

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ask questions, and  
communicate fully and  
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health care providers.**

TODAY'S HEALTH AND WELLNESS

FOR A HOMEOWNER, SAFETY MIGHT BEGIN with a good security system and fresh batteries in the fire alarms. For a driver, it might mean airbags and new tires. But it's just as critical to take proactive steps toward safety when in the role of "patient." This means doing your homework, asking questions, and communicating fully and honestly with your health care providers. While many of us were raised to assume that our doctors were the only ones in control of our health, times and attitudes have changed. Today's responsible patients view themselves as partners in achieving optimal health, and more in control over their health care options.

## Knowledge Is Power

A recent study supported by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) found that “Uninvolved and uninformed patients are less likely to accept the doctor’s choice of treatment, and less likely to do what they need to do to make the treatment work.” In today’s Information Age, obtaining the facts on various conditions and illnesses, as well as their symptoms and treatments, is easier than ever before. A host of reliable medical information can be found online and over the phone, from the online patient library of the American Medical Association, at [www.ama-assn.org](http://www.ama-assn.org), to Web and phone services offered by various medical groups and health plans. By using such resources to learn more about your condition and treatment options, you will be better equipped to communicate with your doctor, ask the right questions, and appreciate the importance of their advice.

Researching hospitals might be just as important to your health. According to the AHRQ, “Hospitals do a good job of treating a wide range of problems. However, for some procedures (such as heart bypass surgery), research shows results often are better at hospitals doing [more] of these procedures.” Your doctor may be able to help you find a hospital that has more experience performing your upcoming procedure.

## Just Ask!

You’ve heard the expression, “The only silly question is the one that goes unasked.” When it comes to your health, take this adage to heart! If you’ve chosen a doctor with whom you feel comfortable, asking questions should be relatively easy.

Write down any questions you may have in advance. If you don’t understand an explanation, say so. Ask your doctor to illustrate the point in a variety of ways until you do understand. If written instructions or brochures will be helpful, request them. Once you’ve left the office, if more questions arise or your symptoms worsen, don’t hesitate to phone.

## Tell Them Where It Hurts

We rightly look to our doctors to determine the proper course of treatment for what ails us. But, at the same time, we sometimes overlook the vital role we ourselves play in helping them to arrive at that assessment. You know your own symptoms and health history far better than anyone else. While it’s important to ask questions, it’s equally important to answer them, honestly and completely, even if doing so seems embarrassing. In fact, don’t wait to be asked. Volunteer any and all pertinent information about your condition. Bring an updated health history and a list of all medications you’re currently taking, along with how often, time of day and strength. Inform your doctor of any allergies you have, or adverse reactions you’ve experienced, to medicines. Be specific when describing symptoms—“I feel a throbbing pain right here, and sometimes it travels over there.”

Remember, beside your doctor, you are your own best advocate when it comes to your health. Make sure you receive and provide the most information possible. Safe and effective health care requires teamwork—a team made up of you and your health care professionals. ●

# Some Additional Patient Safety Tips

## WHEN GETTING A PRESCRIPTION

- Tell your doctor and pharmacist about all medicines you take, including over-the-counter ones such as aspirin and ibuprofen, and dietary supplements like vitamins and herbals. Disclose any drug allergies.
- Know the name of your prescription, the proper dosage and its purpose before you leave your doctor’s office. If you can’t read your doctor’s handwriting, have him or her print the information. When you receive your medicine, check the label carefully.
- Ask your pharmacist about possible side effects, and whether there are foods, beverages or activities to avoid while taking your prescription. Ask what to do if you miss a dose or accidentally take too much.

## FOR MEDICAL TESTING

- Make sure you understand why you need the test, what are the risks and benefits, and how you should prepare.
- Ask when you should expect to receive the results. If you don’t receive them when expected, don’t assume “no news is good news.” Call!

## BEFORE SURGICAL PROCEDURES

- If possible, choose a hospital experienced at providing the specific type of procedure you require.
- Inform your surgeon, anesthesiologist and nurses of any allergies or adverse reactions to anesthesia.
- Make sure that you discuss what is to be done in an upcoming surgery with both your doctor and your surgeon. Have your surgeon mark the site slated for surgery.

## WHEN IN THE HOSPITAL

- Don’t assume everyone involved in your care knows everything about your condition they need to know. Share with each doctor or health care worker information you feel they should have to make informed decisions about your care.
- Request that each health care worker check your ID bracelet before giving medications, treatments or procedures. Verify that the medication or procedure was ordered specifically by your doctor and why.
- Ask all health care workers to wash their hands before administering treatments, changing dressings or performing procedures.
- Have a family member or friend on hand as your advocate.

Sources: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality—20 Tips to Help Prevent Medical Errors, Five Steps to Safer Health Care, and Quick Tips, at [www.ahrq.gov/consumer](http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer).