



Joe's Tips – Module 5

Going to the Hospital

1. Check into hospital quality ratings for the specific type of care you need (cardiac, orthopedic, obstetrics, cancer, etc.).

The hospital that's best for one type of care may not be best for another. Fortunately, quality data is becoming easier for consumers to find. Start with the quality websites listed on the Learn More page. Key quality measures include:

- Level of experience (how frequently the hospital performs the procedure you need).
- Complications rate among patients with your condition.
- Average length of stay among patients with your condition.
- Safety ratings (does the hospital follow proven steps for improving safety and quality, such as having all prescriptions ordered electronically instead of hand-written).
- Other quality credentials, such as whether the hospital complies with The Leapfrog Group, Wisconsin Hospitals Accountable for Quality and other organizations.
- Use of latest technology.

2. Save the ER for real emergencies.

If you have a serious, life-threatening illness or injury such as chest pain, uncontrolled bleeding, difficulty breathing or loss of consciousness, head straight for the emergency room or call 911. Unfortunately, many people go to the ER with problems that could be treated at an urgent care center, "quick care" clinic or even their doctor's office. That drives up medical costs, because the hospital emergency room (ER) is generally the most expensive place to receive care (and often involves long waits.) If it's not a life-threatening problem, *always* call your doctor's office *first* for guidance on where to go for non-emergency medical issues. Another great resource: the "nurse line" services provided by many health plans. See the Learn More page for more help deciding on *Hospital, ER or Urgent Care?*

3. Try to stay in-network.

Using in-network hospitals, doctors and other providers almost always saves you money compared with out-of-network. But don't assume that all doctors who treat you at in-network hospital are also in-network; they may not be. This applies not only to your attending doctor, but also to others working on your care – radiologists, anesthesiologist, pathologists, etc. You should always ask, and if in doubt, just call the number on the back of your insurance card.

4. Check your medical plan's precertification requirements.

Many plans require that you call them to precertify your care before being admitted; otherwise you receive lower benefits and/or pay a penalty (except in a true emergency). Even for emergency care, many plans require that you call in soon after being admitted. Make sure you (and your spouse, if married) are aware of your plan's precertification requirements *before* someone in the family needs inpatient or outpatient hospital care.

5. If you're going to the hospital, ask a trusted friend or family member to go along. Make sure he or she is a good listener.

If you are recovering from surgery or groggy from pain medications, your advocate can look out for your wellbeing when you are not able to do so for yourself. Having "an extra set of eyes and ears" along can be very helpful, especially to confirm your doctor's instructions. Tell your advocate ahead of time what your concerns and questions are, so he or she can prompt you to ask when the time comes. Your advocate doesn't need any special medical training. It's just someone you trust who knows your medical history, pays attention to details, and isn't afraid to ask questions. Note that you will be required to sign a HIPAA release form if you want hospital staff to discuss your care in front of anyone else.

6. Take steps to make sure your wishes will be carried out in the event you can't speak for yourself. That's the purpose of advance directives. The time to do this is well *before* you need medical care. Go to the Learn More page and click *Put Your Wishes in Writing*.

7. Bring a notebook. While at the hospital, write down all procedures you undergo and medications you're given. Your involvement may help prevent medication errors and other preventable mistakes.

8. Be ready to speak up. To the extent you're physically capable, ask every hospital staff member you encounter what he or she is about to do. Show them your identification bracelet before taking medications or receiving treatments. If something doesn't sound or look right, speak up.

9. Be just as careful when you leave the hospital. Make sure you understand – and write down – your discharge instructions, especially if prescription drugs are involved. Ask about any bad interactions between your medication and other drugs, foods or drinks, even herbal supplements. Find out if there are any symptoms or problems that you should call your doctor about. For example, if your pain intensifies or you start running a fever.