

BENEFICIARY EDUCATION FACT SHEET #6

Protecting Your Child: Preventing Medical Errors

This fact sheet is intended to help parents avoid medical errors, and select high-quality providers and healthcare facilities for their family.

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What are Medical Errors?

Medical errors happen when something that was planned as a part of medical care doesn’t work out, or when the wrong plan was used in the first place.

Medical errors can occur anywhere in the healthcare system:

- Hospitals
- Clinics
- Outpatient surgery centers
- Doctors’ offices
- Nursing homes
- Pharmacies
- Patients’ homes

Errors can involve:

- Medicines
- Surgery
- Diagnoses
- Equipment
- Lab reports

Medical errors are one of the Nation’s leading causes of death and injury. Rates of medication errors and adverse drug events for hospitalized children are comparable to rates for hospitalized adults. However, the rate of potential adverse drug events is three times higher in children, and substantially higher still for babies in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs).

Most errors result from problems created by today's **complex healthcare** system. But errors also happen when providers and their patients have **problems communicating**. For example, a recent study found that physicians often do not do enough to help their patients make informed decisions. Uninvolved and uninformed patients are less likely to accept the physician's choice of treatment and less likely to do what they need to do to make the treatment work.

What Can You Do? Be Involved in Your Child's Health Care

The single most important way you can help to prevent errors is to be an active member of your child's healthcare team. That means taking part in every decision about your child's health care. Research shows that patients who are more involved with their care tend to get better results. Some specific tips, based on the latest scientific evidence about what works best, follow.

Medicines

Make sure that all of your child's healthcare providers know about every medicine your child is taking. This includes prescription and over-the-counter medicines, and dietary supplements such as vitamins and herbs.

- ✓ **At least once a year, bring all of your child's medicines and supplements with you to his/her primary care provider.** "Brown bagging" your child's medicines can help you and your provider talk about them and find out if there are any problems. It can also help your provider keep your child's records up-to-date, which can help you get better quality care.
- ✓ **Make sure your child's primary care provider knows about any allergies or adverse reactions your child has had to medicines.** This can help you avoid getting a medicine that can harm your child.
- ✓ **When any healthcare provider writes you a prescription, make sure you can read it.** If you can't read the handwriting, your pharmacist might not be able to either.
- ✓ **When you pick up medicine from the pharmacy, ask: Is this the medicine that my provider prescribed for my child?** A recent study found that 88% of medicine errors involved the wrong drug or the wrong dose.
- ✓ **Ask for information about your child's medicines in terms you can understand—both when the medicines are prescribed and when you receive them.**
 - What is the medicine for?
 - How am I supposed to give it to my child and for how long?
 - What side effects are likely? What do I do if they occur?
 - Is this medicine safe to take with other medicines or dietary supplements?
 - What foods, drinks, or activities should my child avoid while taking this medicine?
- ✓ **If you have any questions about the directions on the medicine labels, ask.** Medicine labels can be hard to understand. For example, ask if "four doses daily" means taking a dose every 6 hours around the clock or just during regular waking hours.
- ✓ **Ask your pharmacist for the best device to measure liquid medicine. Also, ask questions if you're not sure how to use it.** Research shows that many people do not understand the right

way to measure liquid medicines. For example, many use household teaspoons, which often do not hold a true teaspoon of liquid. Special devices, like marked syringes, help people to measure the right dose. Being told how to use the devices helps even more.

- √ **Ask for written information about the side effects your child's medicine could cause.** If you know what might happen, you will be better prepared if it does—or, if something unexpected happens instead. That way, you can report the problem right away and get help before it gets worse.

Hospital Stays

- √ **If you have a choice, choose a hospital at which many patients have the procedure or surgery your child needs.** Research shows that patients tend to have better results when they are treated in hospitals that have a great deal of experience with their condition.
- √ **If your child is in a hospital, consider asking all healthcare workers who have direct contact with your child whether they have washed their hands.** Hand washing is an important way to prevent the spread of infections in hospitals. Yet, it is not done regularly or thoroughly enough. A recent study found that when patients checked whether healthcare workers washed their hands, the workers washed their hands more often and used more soap.
- √ **When your child is being discharged from the hospital, ask a physician or a nurse to explain the treatment plan you will use at home.** This includes learning about your child's medicines and finding out when your child can get back to his/her regular activities. Research shows that at discharge time, physicians think their patients understand more than they really do about what they should or should not do when they return home.

Surgery

- √ **If your child is having surgery, make sure that you, your primary care provider, and the surgeon all agree and are clear on exactly what will be done.** Doing surgery at the wrong site (for example, operating on the left knee instead of the right) is rare. But even once is too often. The good news is that wrong-site surgery is 100% preventable. The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons urges its members to sign their initials directly on the site to be operated on before the surgery.

Other Steps You Can Take

- √ **Speak up if you have questions or concerns.** You have a right to question anyone who is involved with your child's care.
- √ **Make sure that someone, such as your child's primary care provider, is in charge of your child's care.** This is especially important if your child has many health problems, has multiple care providers, or is in a hospital.
- √ **Make sure that all health professionals involved in your child's care have important health information about your child.** Do not assume that everyone knows everything they need to.
- √ **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 your child. Your child could be better off without it.

- ✓ **If your child has a test, don't assume that no news is good news.** Ask about the results.
- ✓ **Learn about your child's condition and treatments by asking your child's care providers and by using other reliable sources.** For example, treatment recommendations based on the latest scientific evidence are available from the National Guidelines Clearinghouse™ at <http://www.guideline.gov>. Also ask your provider if your child's treatment is based on the latest medical evidence.

Choosing Quality Health Care

Here are some tips for making quality a key factor in the decisions you make about health plans, providers, treatments, and hospitals.

Look for health plans that:

- Has been given high ratings by its members on the things that are important to you.
- Has the providers and facilities (e.g., hospitals, birth centers, etc) 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 primary and specialty care providers who:

- Have received high ratings for quality of care.
- Have the training and experience to meet your family's needs.
- Will work with you to make decisions about your child's health care.

If your child becomes ill, make sure you understand:

- His/her diagnosis.
- How soon he/she needs to be treated.
- Your treatment choices, including the benefits and risks of each treatment.
- How much experience your provider has in treating your child's 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 child's condition.
- Monitors quality of care and works to improve quality.

References

All information adapted from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality:

- *20 Tips to Help Prevent Medical Errors in Children. Patient Fact Sheet.* AHRQ Publication No. 02-PO34. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality; 2002. Available at: <http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/20tipkid.htm>. Accessed April 8, 2010.
- *Improving Health Care Quality: A Guide for Patients and Families.* AHRQ Publication No. 01-0004. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality; 2000. Available at: <http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/qntlite/>. Accessed June 1, 2007.