

10 tips for safer health care



Please note that the following document was created by the former Australian Council for Safety and Quality in Health Care.

The former Council ceased its activities on 31 December 2005 and the Australian Commission for Safety and Quality in Health Care assumed responsibility for many of the former Council's documents and initiatives.

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care can be contacted through its website at safetyandquality.gov.au or by email mail@safetyandquality.gov.au

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What is in this booklet?

This booklet has been produced to assist people to become more actively involved in their health care. It explains how and why things can go wrong, and how you can work in partnership with your health care professionals to get the best possible care.

The booklet also:

- gives 10 Tips for improving your health care, which include questions you might like to ask your health care professional
- outlines what you can expect from your health care professional
- lists some sources of information for finding out more about your condition and how to manage your medicines
- explains what you can do if you have concerns about your health care.

Why is health care safety important?

Australia has one of the best health care systems in the world. This means that when we need to visit a health care professional, we expect to receive the safest health care available.

But health care is becoming more complicated every day. Even a small oversight in one area can have a big flow-on effect in another area. Things may go wrong, mistakes and accidents may happen – and sometimes, things don't work out as expected and harm results from our health care.

Research has found that this happens in about 1 in 10 hospital admissions before, during or after a hospital stay¹. The results can be relatively minor and easily fixed, or more serious.

Most problems happen because of the way things are done, not as a result of who is doing them. These system problems increase the risk that something will go wrong.

As an example, when a doctor orders a test there are several points where things can go wrong. If the writing is unclear, you might be given the wrong test or you might be given the right test in the wrong place. After the test, a mistake could be made in reading the results or in recording them. The results might be sent to the wrong address or not sent at all. They might be filed under the wrong name or not acted on by the treating doctor.

1. Thomas EJ, Studdert DM, Runciman WB et al (1999) A comparison of iatrogenic injury studies in Australia and America 1: context, methods, casemix, population, patient and hospital characteristics. *International Journal for Quality in Healthcare* 12(5): 371–78.

Systems in health care need to be improved so that problems are less likely to happen. If problems do happen, they need to be noticed quickly and fixed before they cause harm to patients.

In this way health care professionals can be supported to deliver the best possible care. Using the same example, solutions might include making sure that all patients are asked what test they are having, introducing electronic ordering of tests and using barcodes to ensure that the results are sent to the right person.

When things go wrong, it is important that health care services find out exactly what happened and actively look for ways to help stop it from happening again. They should also let the patient and their carers know what happened and what will be done about it.

But improving safety is not just the business of doctors, nurses or other health professionals. No single group can do it on their own. Everyone has a part to play, from governments, who make high level decisions about the health system, to the patients receiving care.

By taking an active role in your health care, you can help to make sure you get the best possible care for your needs.

Annie's situation, described in the case study over the page, is a good example of how a person can become involved in their health care and how a health system can learn from a mistake, and in the process, help people to do a better job.



Case Study

Annie* realises the importance of becoming involved in her health care.

Annie had been taking a particular medicine for a period of time. She recently visited hospital and was discharged with a new prescription for the same medicine. This time, however, a new brand of the same medicine was dispensed to Annie.

After taking her medicine for four days, Annie noticed that she was becoming increasingly tired and clumsy. The next day she was unable to hold things in her hand. She spilt boiling water over herself and broke several glasses. Annie then checked her medicine. She pulled back the label that covered the box and found out that she had been given the wrong (higher) dosage.

After calling the Poisons Information line, Annie contacted her local general practitioner and together they worked out a program for how she could safely reduce the amount of the medicine she had been taking.

She later contacted the hospital pharmacy, who apologised sincerely for their mistake and for what had happened as a result of her taking the higher dose of the medicine.

The pharmacy has now reviewed their processes for dispensing medicines and put measures in place to reduce the likelihood of this happening to anyone else.

Annie is now checking all her medicines when they are dispensed to help avoid this happening again.



You can contact the Poisons Information Centre in your State or Territory by phoning 13 11 26

* Not her real name

How can you improve your health care?

Good health care is best achieved through an active and positive partnership between you and your health care professional. To get the best possible care, see yourself and your health care professional as a team and be involved as much as possible in every decision about your health.

Be active: seek and give information

We can lessen the chance of things going wrong by getting our message across clearly and making sure that we understand what's happening. It's OK to ask your health care professional questions and to expect answers you can understand. Some people find it helpful to write their questions down before their appointment and to take notes, others like to have a family member or carer with them.

You can also ask for an interpreter to be with you when you visit your health care professional. Information about interpreters can be obtained from your State or Territory health department. Their contact details are on the back of this booklet.



10 tips for safer health care

The following 10 Tips² can assist you to become more active in your health care. Some questions that you might want to ask your health care professional are also included. You can make a longer appointment or come back at a more convenient time if there is not enough time for you to ask all your questions.

1. Be actively involved in your own health care

Taking part in decisions that are made about your treatment is the single most important way to help prevent things from going wrong and to get the best possible care for your needs.

2. Speak up if you have any questions or concerns

Choose a health care professional with whom you feel comfortable talking about your health and treatment. Remember that you have a right to ask questions and to expect answers that you can understand. Your health care professional wants to answer your questions, but can only answer them if you ask.

A family member, carer or interpreter can be there with you if this will help. If you want to, you can always ask for another professional opinion.

Ask

- I'm not sure I understand what you said...
- I'm worried that...
- Could you please explain that to me again?
- Can I come back with my family to talk about this again?

2. These 10 Tips have been adapted from the US Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality patient fact sheets (ahrq.gov/consumer).

3. Learn more about your condition or treatments by asking your doctor or nurse and by using other reliable sources of information

It's a good idea to collect as much reliable information as you can about your condition, tests and treatments.

Ask

- Can you please tell me more about my condition?
- How sure are you that I have this condition?
- Do you have any information that I can take away with me?
- Can you tell me where I can find out more?
- Why do I need to have this particular test?
- What are the different treatments for this condition?
- How will this treatment help me?
- Is this treatment based on the latest scientific evidence?
- What are the risks of this treatment?
- What is likely to happen if I don't have this treatment?
- What does the treatment involve?
- What should I look out for?
- What can I do to help myself?
- When should I come back to see you?

4. Keep a list of all the medicines you are taking

You can use the list to let your doctor and pharmacist know about everything you are taking, and about any drug allergies you may have. Remember to include prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines and complementary medicines (such as vitamins and herbs) on your list. Do you need to add your baby to your membership?

5. Make sure you understand the medicines you are taking

When you get your medicine, read the label, including the warnings. Make sure it is what your doctor ordered for you.

Ask

- Do you have any written information about this medicine?
- What do the directions on the label mean?
- How much should I take, and when should I take it?
- What are the common side effects?
- What should I look out for?
- How long before it starts to work?
- Will this medicine interact with the other medicines that I'm taking?
- Are there any foods or other things that I should avoid while I'm on this medicine?
- How long do I need to take this medicine?

6. Make sure you get the results of any test or procedure

If you don't get the results when expected, don't assume 'no news is good news'. Call your doctor to find out your results, and ask what they mean for your care.

The next four tips are for people who are in hospital, who are thinking about going to hospital, or who are going to have a medical procedure.

7. Talk to your doctor or other health care professional about your options if you need to go into hospital

Most hospitals do a good job at treating a wide range of problems. Other hospitals specialise in particular areas, such as heart bypass surgery. Become involved in decisions about your hospital treatment by discussing your options with your health care professionals.

Ask

- How quickly do I need to have this treatment?
- Is there an option to have the surgery/procedure done as a day patient?
- Is there more than one hospital to choose from?
- If so, which has the best care and results for treating my condition?

8. Make sure you understand what will happen if you need surgery or a procedure

Ask your doctor or surgeon exactly what the procedure will involve and who will be in charge of your care when you're in hospital. If you want, your general practitioner or other health care professional can help you find out what you need to know.

Remember to tell the surgeon, anaesthetist and nurses if you have allergies or have ever had a bad reaction to an anaesthetic or any other drug.

Ask

- How will having this surgery/procedure help me?
- What are the possible risks, and what are the chances of these happening?
- What will happen if I don't have this surgery/procedure?
- Are there other ways that this condition could be treated or managed?
- Who will be doing the surgery/procedure?
- What will it involve and how long will it take?
- How can I expect to feel during recovery?
- What will happen after the surgery/procedure?
- Who will be in charge of my care while I'm in hospital?
- How long will I be in hospital?
- What is the total cost of having this surgery/procedure?

9. Make sure you, your doctor and your surgeon all agree on exactly what will be done during the operation

You should confirm with your doctor and your surgeon the details of the operation you will be having as close as possible to it happening.

Doing surgery on the wrong site (eg operating on the left knee rather than the right) or doing the wrong operation (eg removing the appendix instead of the gall bladder) are both extremely rare but even once is too often. The good news is that many professional organisations are encouraging surgeons to adopt measures to reduce the risk of wrong site surgery.

10. Before you leave hospital, ask your doctor or other health care professionals to explain the treatment plan you will use at home

Doctors can sometimes think that their patients understand more than they really do about their continuing treatment and follow-up after they are discharged home from hospital.

Ask

- Who will be following up on my care and when do I need to see them?
- How long will I be taking this medicine?
- Will I require physiotherapy or other rehabilitation services?
- When can I return to work?
- When can I play sport?
- When can I drive?
- Will I be given a written summary of my care to pass on to my GP?

Remember to visit your GP as soon as possible after you are discharged.

You can expect your health care professional to:

1. Actively involve patients in their own health care.
2. Set aside time to allow patients to talk about any concerns that they may have.
3. Provide information for patients in a language and format that is easy to understand.
4. Take a complete medication history which includes over-the-counter and complementary medicines and treatments.
5. Provide oral and written information about medicines in plain language.
6. Make sure that patients get the results of their tests and investigations.
7. Set out all possible treatment options for patients to consider.
8. Provide patients with complete information if they are to have surgery or a procedure.
9. Make sure patients know exactly what is going to happen to them in surgery and that there is a written consent to proceed.
10. Discuss discharge planning if patients need to go to hospital. Start planning as early as practical – if possible, before the time of the hospital admission.

Where can you go for more information?

The more you know about your condition and its treatment, the more likely it is that you will get the best possible care. You can talk to your doctor, nurse, hospital, pharmacist or community health care professional if you have any queries. You might want to contact a support group for people with similar health conditions.

Health information

A good place to start finding information about your condition is the HealthInsite website. HealthInsite is a Commonwealth Government initiative. It aims to improve the health of Australians by providing easy access to quality information. It can be found at **www.healthinsite.gov.au**

Your State or Territory department of health is committed to providing you with reliable information about health conditions and local health services. Contact details are listed on the back of this booklet.

If you don't have access to the internet at home, you can visit your local library where someone will be happy to show you how to get the information you need.

Be wise with medicines

Information and tips about how you can better manage your medicines is contained in the 'Be wise with medicines' brochure. The brochure is available on the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing's website at **www.health.gov.au** or freecall **1800 02 06 13**.

When things go wrong with medicines...

Call the Adverse Medicine Events Line on 1300 134 237 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm Australian Eastern Standard Time (AEST) for reporting or advice on side-effects, errors or near-misses with medicines.

Do you have concerns about your health care? Need help?

- First, talk with your health care professionals about your concerns.
- Most health care professionals welcome the opportunity to discuss any concerns you have about your health care – you might want to make a longer appointment or come back at a more convenient time.
- Seek another professional opinion.
- Contact the relevant area of the hospital or health care organisation.
- Many hospitals have patient advocates or a complaints officer who welcome feedback and assist people with their concerns.
- Contact the independent health care complaints body in your State or Territory.
- Your State or Territory health department can give you the contact details.



Contact details for health information

ACT

ACT Health
132 281
TTY 133 677,
then ask for 132 281
health.act.gov.au

NSW

NSW Health
(02) 9391 9000
TTY 133 677, then ask
for (02) 9391 9000
health.nsw.gov.au

Northern Territory

Department of Health
and Families
(08) 8999 2400
health.nt.gov.au

Queensland

Queensland Health
(07) 3234 0111
TTY 133 677, then ask
for (07) 3234 0111
Healthy Living Site
health.qld.gov.au

South Australia

Department of Health
(08) 8226 6000
TTY 133 677, then ask
for (08) 8226 6000
health.sa.gov.au

Tasmania

Department of Health
and Human Services
Helpline 1300 135 513
dhhs.tas.gov.au

Victoria

Better Health Channel
1800 126 637
betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Western Australia

Health Direct
1800 022 222
TTY 1800 555 677,
then ask for 1800 022 222
health.wa.gov.au

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Further information on the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care can be found on their website at safetyandquality.gov.au

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