



Pittsburgh Regional Healthcare Initiative

White paper series



Hospitals are filled with contradictions. You come to them because you're sick and need care, but hospitals are places where infections, uncertainty, and errors might actually worsen your condition. Yet miracles happen so routinely that we've come to expect them. Broken bodies are fixed, illnesses are cured, and spirits are repaired because of the hospitals' caregivers. Unlike many business organizations, hospitals don't wrestle with the problem on an uncommitted workforce. You will never see a more motivated group: nurses, doctors, technicians and administrators. They are infused with and exude a single-minded desire to comfort and heal, above all else.

—Paul H. O'Neill, CEO, Pittsburgh Regional Healthcare Initiative

Tips for the Healthcare Consumer

The Pittsburgh Regional Healthcare Initiative (PRHI) is a consortium of hundreds of clinicians, 40 hospitals, four major insurers, dozens of major and small-business healthcare purchasers, corporate and civic leaders, and elected officials throughout Southwestern Pennsylvania. Together we are working to achieve perfect care for every patient who encounters the healthcare system.

We believe that flawed systems—not flawed people—cause most medical errors. Yet even when the healthcare system addresses these problems in a systematic, scientific way and makes considerable, sustained improvements, patients will remain important partners in their own health care. With that in mind, PRHI presents this compilation of tips for consumers (patients) in acute and chronic care settings.

PRHI partners are working to achieve perfect patient care in the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area using the following, *patient-centered* goals:

- Zero medication errors.
- Zero healthcare-acquired (nosocomial) infections.
- *Perfect clinical outcomes*, as measured by complications, readmissions and other patient outcomes, in the following areas:
 - ✧ Coronary artery bypass graft surgery.
 - ✧ Orthopedics: hip and knee replacement surgery.
 - ✧ Obstetrics: maternal and child outcome.
 - ✧ Chronic conditions: depression and diabetes.

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What do patients need to know before surgery?

Here are some things patients can do to reduce their risk of infection from surgery: ¹

Before Surgery

- Ask if surgery is absolutely necessary.
- Stop tobacco use at least 30 days before surgery
- Ask to keep your preoperative hospital stay as short as possible
- Avoid elective surgery if you have an existing infection; postpone any surgeries until infection is treated and resolved.
- Make sure the surgical site isn't shaved the day before; if hair must be removed, request that electric clippers be used right before operation
- Request an antiseptic bath or shower the night before surgery
- Check to see if you'll get a preventive dose of antibiotics an hour before surgery
- Ask that people in the operating room be restricted to necessary medical personnel only

- Request that operating staff follow sterilization practices -- and that no one have artificial fingernails or current infections
- Make sure that the operating room will be ventilated so that air flows out but not in during surgery
- Make sure there are no plans to use reprocessed surgical blades, catheters and other single-use medical devices



After Surgery

- Make sure your antibiotics are discontinued within 24 hours after the operation. (There are exceptions: ask your doctor)
- Advise doctor of any fever, weight loss, pain, ooze or swelling at site
- For up to two years after the operation, take antibiotics after joint surgery or invasive procedures such as dental work

¹ From *How to Keep the Hospital From Making you Sicker*, Laura Landro, Wall Street Journal, September 11, 2003.

How can consumers protect themselves against medical mistakes?

The Yale New Haven Hospital publishes consumer protection information at <http://www.ynhh.org/choice/safety.html>. The information below is adapted for Pennsylvanians from the information contained on the Yale website.



Rule One: When in doubt, ASK.

Communication

Communication is the most important aid to patient safety. If you are talking regularly with the people who are caring for you, you may be able to clear up a misunderstanding before it creates a problem. For example, maybe you are allergic to something and it isn't written down in your medical record. Feel free to ask questions whenever you are not clear about something. Ask questions if you are not sure why something is being done or if you are just plain curious.

✧ If you have questions or concerns about your care or safety, talk with your nurse, the unit's patient services manager or your physician. If you still have concerns, call the hospital's Patient Relations or ombudsman program.

✧ You have the right to be well-informed, well-cared for and safe. You also have the right to ask for a second opinion or even a transfer to another hospital if you do not feel safe.

✧ When you go home, make sure you are clear about discharge instructions including medications and need for a follow-up visit. Be sure you are given a phone number to call if you have questions.

✧ Ask for an interpreter if you are deaf or hearing impaired, or if English is not your primary language.



✧ Don't be afraid to challenge and be assertive. A confident caregiver will appreciate and understand your need to know.

Minimizing infections

Germ and bacteria exist at home, at work and in hospitals. All hospitals work hard to prevent you from getting an infection while you are in the hospital. How can patients help?

- ✧ Remind your nurses, physicians or therapists to use alcohol-based hand sanitizer, wash their hands, or wear gloves before examining you or giving you your medicine.
- ✧ Ask visitors to use alcohol-based hand sanitizer (such as Purell) or wash their hands before and after their visit with you.
- ✧ Ask friends or relatives who have colds, respiratory symptoms or other contagious illnesses not to visit you or anyone in the hospital. Minimize visits from children

Patients,
You have a **RIGHT** to clean hands.
Please remind **EVERYONE** to
sanitize or wash their hands when
entering and exiting your room.

Signs like this one at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System remind patients and workers alike that hand hygiene is a 100% requirement.

under 12, as they frequently have colds or other infections.

- ✧ Flu or pneumonia vaccines can help prevent illnesses in elderly or high-risk patients. Please get a vaccination if it is recommended in the hospital.
- ✧ Let your nurse know if gowns and linens are soiled.
- ✧ Some patients are on "isolation precautions," usually for protection if they are in a weakened state or to protect others from something infectious the patient is carrying.

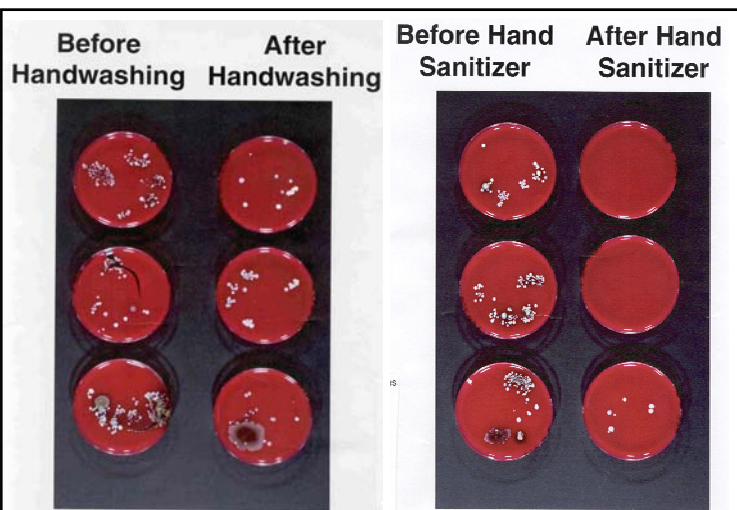
If you are on "isolation," understand what your isolation means and what you should expect from the hospital staff or visitors. Gloves, gowns and masks are sometimes appropriate, depending on the illness.

Reducing medication errors

In the past decade, the number of new medications has risen dramatically. Ask whether your hospital has computerized physician ordering medication system. If not, ask how they minimize prescribing errors.

How can you help to further reduce the potential for problems?

- ✧ Ask ahead of time and choose a hospital that uses a computerized physician ordering medication system.



If hands are soiled, hand-washing is preferred. However, the CDC now recommends the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers, such as Purell, for most routine hand cleansing before and after each patient encounter. Hospital visitors should sanitize their hands as well.

The *Institute of Safe Medication Practices* publishes an online list of consumer questions and answers about taking medication safely. Also links to the Premier edition of ISMP's online newsletter, *Safe Medicine*.
<http://www.ismp.org/Pages/Consumer.html>



Medication interactions can be dangerous. Tell your doctor and nurse about **all** medications you are taking—even herbal remedies.

- ✧ Ask your nurse about your medications - what they are, what they do, when they are given and their side effects. Become familiar with their color and size. Let your nurse know if they are overdue or look different.
- ✧ Make sure your doctor or nurse knows if you have any allergies or previous reactions to drugs, food, latex, etc.
- ✧ Do not bring medications from home, unless requested by your doctor or hospital staff.
- ✧ Make sure to tell your doctor and nurse about other drugs you are taking (even vitamins, herbal remedies or over-the-counter medicine).

Preventing Falls

Most falls occur when patients try to get out of bed on their own, most often to go to the bathroom.

Don't ever be embarrassed to ask for help.

How can you help prevent falls?

- ✧ Always ask for assistance from the nursing staff, especially at night.
- ✧ Keep your call button near you.
- ✧ Make sure there is adequate light to see, and keep your eyeglasses within reach.
- ✧ Wear slippers with rubber soles to prevent slipping.
- ✧ Don't feel like a burden if you need to ask for help frequently. Sometimes people take medications that cause them to use the bathroom more often than they normally would. This can't be avoided and should never be a cause for embarrassment. If possible, call for help before the need to get up and move becomes urgent.

- ✧ Point out any fluids or obstructions on the floor to anyone involved in your care.

Equipment / treatment errors

Well informed patients can assist doctors, nurses and other hospital workers in avoiding mistakes. How can you help prevent or minimize errors caused by equipment during treatment?

- ✧ Find out what you should expect from any equipment being used on or around you. How it is supposed to sound or act, what it is supposed to do for you? This way you can question anything that seems unusual or different from what you were told. The same questions should be asked for any treatment you get. You may want to ask a family member or friend to listen with you when staff explains a diagnosis, treatment plan, test results or discharge plans. It is hard to take everything in when you are scared or have been given too much information in a short time.
- ✧ Make sure the brakes are locked when getting into or out of a wheelchair.
- ✧ Check the information on your hospital I.D. bracelet to make sure your name and medical record number are on it. Two patients can have the same name but no one else will have your medical record number. Make sure all staff check it before any procedure or test. If your bracelet comes off, ask someone to get you another one, you should have your identification bracelet on at all times.

- ✧ Write down questions that you want to ask the staff about your procedure, treatment and medications when the question comes into you head. You may not remember what you wanted to ask when lots of things are going on if you haven't written it down.



To reduce the potential of falls and injuries—for yourself and the healthcare worker—make sure the brakes are locked when you get into or out of a wheelchair.



Hearing aids and eyewear are the most commonly lost items in hospitals. A labeled container will help you keep track of them.

Other tips

- ✧ Consider a hospital's results in the type of care you will be receiving. Pennsylvanians are fortunate to have access to credible quality reports from the PA Health Care Cost Containment Council (www.phc4.org) in many areas of hospital care. The data represent a "snapshot," not an exhaustive critique.
- ✧ Pay careful attention to where you put your dentures, hearing aids and glasses—they are all important to your safety and they are the most commonly lost items in hospitals. Put them in a special container with your name on it, if possible.
- ✧ Make sure the nurse call-button on your bed works and you know how to use it. Know the hospital's internal emergency telephone number.
- ✧ Do not bring in food or medications, even over-the-counter ones from outside the hospital unless approved by your nurse or physician.
- ✧ **Speak to a Discharge Planner before you are released.** An adequate discharge plan may include input from your doctor, the nurses, pharmacist, lab, social worker, nutritionist and others. You will know what to expect when you go home, and when you should call the doctor.

Continuing safe practices at home

Even after you have had a safe hospital experience, continue your awareness of safe health care practices at home.

- ✧ Communicate with your doctors or pharmacists. Ask questions, and write down what they say.
- ✧ You can get bed side-rails at home if you need them. Keep a phone or a bell near your bed if you might need help. Never smoke in bed.
- ✧ Be extraordinarily cautious if you have oxygen equipment at home. It is highly flammable.



- ✧ If you have medical equipment that needs to be plugged in, use a grounded or three-prong connector. Don't use extension cords.



How can consumers protect against antibiotic-resistant infection?

Antibiotic-resistant infections now account for over half of hospital-acquired *staphylococcus* infections. Until recently, these resistant organisms were thought to be confined to hospitals. However, recent outbreaks in some American cities prove an important point: these dangerous organisms can be spread beyond hospital walls.

Fortunately, practicing good infection control in everyday encounters can protect you and your family from infection of all sorts. Consider these tips from a recent *Wall Street Journal* article²:

In General

- ✧ Keep infections covered with clean, dry bandages.
- ✧ Wash hands frequently with soap and warm water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- ✧ Avoid sharing personal items (e.g., towels, washcloth, razor, and clothing) that may have had contact with the infected wound.
- ✧ Wash linens and clothes with hot water and laundry detergent. Dry clothes in a hot dryer rather than air drying.
- ✧ If you have an antibiotic-resistant staph skin infection, tell any health-care providers who are treating you.
- ✧ Don't take antibiotics for viral infections such as colds or flu; if you are prescribed antibiotics for a bacterial infection, finish all the medication.

On Sports Teams

- ✧ Exclude players with potentially infectious skin

lesions from practice or competition if their wounds can't be covered.

- ✧ Shower and wash with soap and hot water after practice and competition. Establish routine cleaning schedules for all sports equipment.
- ✧ Train coaches and athletes in first aid for wounds.
- ✧ Encourage athletes to report skin lesions and encourage coaches to assess athletes regularly for skin lesions.

In Day Care

- ✧ Teach children to wash hands after contact with mouth or nose, and after using the bathroom.
- ✧ Teach children to cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- ✧ Use tissues for runny noses and sneezes and discard immediately.
- ✧ Don't let children share pacifiers, cups, washcloths, towels or toothbrushes; use disposable cups.



- ✧ Disinfect doorknobs, toilet handles and toys with disinfectant or hot soapy water.
- ✧ Make sure children have current immunizations.
- ✧ Limit children's contact with each other until any wounds heal.

² from *A Growing Risk for Staph Infections*, Laura Landro, *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 2003

What help is available for people with chronic disease?

People with chronic disease, such as diabetes and depression, need different information than people facing hospitalization and acute care. Those with chronic diseases need long-term information on how to manage them, and how to complications that result in the need for acute care.

Fortunately, local and national resources are numerous for people with diabetes and depression. To help connect people with the information they seek, PRHI has published the *Diabetes and Depression Resource Guide*, available online at www.prhi.org, or by calling 412-535-0292, ext. 114.

Introducing PHIN

People with chronic diseases are not the only ones in need of quick information. Physicians who care for them often lack the basic information (date of last lab tests and results, prescription data, etc.) at the time of office visits. Without basic information, physicians cannot apply the best care they know.

PRHI is committed to helping all healthcare stakeholders to make Pittsburgh the region in the country where every patient with diabetes or depression receives perfect care with every healthcare encounter. We call it the 100% Perfect Care Zone.

PRHI recently unveiled the Pittsburgh Health Information Network (PHIN), a secure internet-based network aimed at making it easier for patients and physicians to have current, pertinent patient data at their fingertips, resulting in better patient care. PHIN was created in close consultation with:

- ✧ Quality Insights of Pennsylvania (QIP)
- ✧ Hospitals and healthcare systems
- ✧ Legal experts
- ✧ Physicians and other health professionals
- ✧ Laboratories and pharmacy providers
- ✧ Health care purchasers
- ✧ Consumers
- ✧ Insurers and managed care organizations

The introduction of PHIN is a significant step toward making the Pittsburgh region a 100% Perfect Care Zone for diabetes and depression.



**Download your copy of the PRHI
Diabetes and Depression Resource
Guide at www.prhi.org**

The Internet can be confusing. Which websites are generally considered reliable?

Consumers are more educated today than ever before. Still, the sheer amount of information on the Internet can be confusing. Much of it is worthwhile, but some of it is not.

PRHI convened a group of local physicians to evaluate a few health and safety websites. While PRHI does not endorse individual websites, the sites listed here are considered good sources of information by the committee of physicians who evaluated them.

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention	Disease management; prevention	http://www.cdc.gov
Center for Information Therapy	Connecting the right information to the right person at the right time to help people make wise health decisions	www.informationtherapy.org
Health Finders	An e-home health library for the lay population.	http://www.healthfinder.gov
Institute for Health Care Improvement	Primarily offers information on quality conferences, collaboratives and strategies on both global and organizational levels.	http://ihi.org
Mayo Clinic	Health Oasis: tools include health management, health decision-making and personal health scorecard	www.mayoclinic.com
National Library of Medicine	Library of medicine and National Institutes of Health Info on health, drugs, medical encyclopedia	http://www.medlineplus.gov
Web MD	General consumer information on health	www.webmd.org
Patient Powered	Site from Whatcom County, Washington State known for its patient health library	http://www.patientpowered.org

The websites cited in this publication (and listed below) give information on keeping consumers safe during encounters with the healthcare system.

Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP)	Preventing medication errors	http://www.ismp.org/Pages/Consumer.html
Yale New Haven Hospital	Staying safe in the hospital	http://www.ynhh.org/choice/safety.html