

# Be a Smart Healthcare Consumer

When it comes to your health, getting quality care should be the number one priority. There are many tips and tools you can use to feel confident that you are getting the best care for your needs.

## Choosing a Plan

When choosing a plan the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) recommends that you look for a plan that:

- Has been rated highly by its members
- Helps people stay well and get better
- Is accredited
- Has the doctors and hospitals you need
- Provides the benefits you need
- Provides services where and when you need them
- Meets your budget.

## Choosing a Physician

The first thing to consider when choosing a physician is whether you need a primary care physician or a specialist. A primary care physician is someone who takes care of the most common medical conditions.

They will:

- Provide preventive care
- Identify and treat common medical conditions
- Assess your medical problems and direct you to the best place for that care
- Make referrals to specialists when necessary.

You can get a referral for a primary care physician from your health plan, state medical associations, friends, relatives or other healthcare professionals.

A specialty doctor is someone who has advanced training in a certain area of medicine.

Your primary care physician is a great starting place for a referral to a specialist.

When choosing a physician, there are things you should think about. The National Institutes of Health recommends that you consider the following:

- Does the provider participate in your insurance plan?
- Is the office staff friendly and helpful? Is the office good about returning calls?
- Are the office hours convenient?
- How easy is it to reach the provider?
- What type of communication style do you prefer?



- Do you prefer a provider focused on disease treatment, or wellness and prevention?
- Does the provider have a conservative or aggressive approach to treatment?
- Does the provider order a lot of tests?
- Does the provider refer to other specialists frequently or infrequently?
- What do colleagues and patients say about the provider?
- Does the provider invite you to be involved in your care? Do they view your patient-doctor relationship as a true partnership?

## Choosing a Hospital

It is important to choose a hospital before you are in need of one. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a website called "Hospital Compare". By going to [www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov](http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov) you can see the results of patient satisfaction surveys and compare hospitals in your area. The AHRQ recommends you look for a hospital that:

- Is accredited by The Joint Commission, the national healthcare accreditation organization
- Is rated highly by your state, consumer or professional groups
- Is one where your doctor has privileges
- Is covered by your health plan
- Has experience and success with your condition
- Checks and works to improve its own quality of care.

If you need emergency care, you should go to the nearest hospital.

# Be a Smart Healthcare Consumer

## Be Informed!

Taking an active role in your health is the best way to ensure you are getting the quality treatment. Talk to your physician, ask questions and make sure you clearly understand everything. Remember:

- You know important things about your symptoms and your health history.
- Tell your doctor personal information—even if you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable.
- Bring an up-to-date health history list with you.
- Always bring a list of the medicines you take and the dosage. Include over-the-counter medications, vitamins and herbal supplements too.
- Talk about any allergies or reactions you have had to your medicines.
- Tell your doctor about any alternative medicines or treatments you receive.
- Bring other medical information, such as x-ray films, test results and medical records.

## Ask Questions!

Don't be shy! Ask questions to ensure you understand everything. Write down your questions so you remember to ask everything. Your list of questions might include:

- What is my diagnosis?
- What are the side effects or risks of this treatment?
- How effective is this treatment?
- Is this covered by my insurance?
- How will the results from this test affect my treatment?

## Rx Tips

When taking a new medication, follow these tips:

- Use the same pharmacy so all your prescription records are in one place.
- Read and save the information that comes with your medicine.
- Keep a list of all the medicines, vitamins and dietary supplements you take. Show it to your doctor and pharmacist.

- Make sure medicine does not freeze if you store it in the refrigerator.
- Throw away any medicine that has expired or that your doctor has discontinued. Ask your pharmacist for advice on how to throw it away.

## Be an informed patient!

Even hospital patients can benefit by being informed consumers. Unfortunately medical errors do happen, but the more active a role you take in your care the less likely you are to experience a medical mistake. The AHRQ recommends the following to help keep your stay in the hospital safe:

- If you have a choice, choose a hospital at which many patients have had the procedure or surgery you need.
- If you are in a hospital, ask all healthcare workers who have direct contact with you whether they have washed their hands.
- If you are having surgery, make sure that you, your doctor and your surgeon all agree on what will be done.
- When you are being discharged from the hospital, ask your doctor to explain the treatment plan you will use at home.
- Don't be afraid to speak up if you have concerns or questions!

## Take an active role!

When it comes to taking an active role in your healthcare, keeping yourself healthy needs to play a role:

- Don't smoke or use tobacco products.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Be physically active.
- Eat right!
- Take your medications as prescribed
- Get all your recommend screenings and immunizations.

Get help from your healthcare provider about any of these preventive measures if you need more information or support.

### Sources

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, <http://www.ahrq.gov/>

National Institutes of Health, <http://www.nih.gov/>

Hospital Compare, [www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov](http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov)