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Ask questions to get best health care possible

By *Flori Meeks*, contributing writer

When a serious illness or injury touches our lives, we have to place a great deal of trust in the people who are caring for us. But during these times, it's more critical than ever to remain as informed and as involved in the decision-making process as possible. Think of yourself and your family as a safety net that can help prevent a difficult situation from getting worse. The extra effort might spare you more suffering and expense.

If you're going to be hospitalized, consider taking the following precautions:

- Do your homework. Make sure the facility where you will be hospitalized has experience in treating your condition. If you need help getting this information, ask your doctor.
- Make sure your primary care physician (PCP) is in charge. Having one person who understands your overall health history and circumstances helps ensure you get the care you need, when you need it.
- Tell the health care staff about your condition. You might think that everyone who provides your care or services knows all about you, but they may not.
- See that health care workers wash their hands before caring for you. This is one important way to prevent the spread of germs and infections.
- Ask about services or tests. "More" is not always "better." Find out why a test or service is needed and how it will help you.
- Sweat the details. Once you know why you are having a procedure, make sure it's the right one. For example, if you are having an operation on your knee, make sure the correct knee is prepped for surgery.
- Always get your test results. If you have a test taken, don't assume that no news is good news. Ask the doctor or nurse to explain the results to you.
- Ask about what to do when you get home. Before leaving the hospital, be sure to talk with the doctor or nurse about any prescriptions you were given, especially the dosing schedule and any side effects that could occur. See if he or she has suggestions about how to help you recover more quickly. Ask when you can return to your regular activities and whether you need a follow-up appointment.

If you have a serious illness, even when you're not in the hospital, it's to your advantage to keep the lines of communication open between you and your doctor. In fact, you may want to take a spouse, relative or friend with you to an appointment to ask questions and offer support.

Ask your doctor:

- What is my diagnosis? Can you explain it to me in detail?
- Is my condition chronic (long-term) or acute (severe or rapid onset of symptoms, but short-term)?
- Is it likely to get worse?
- What is the recommended treatment? What are the benefits and risks of this treatment?
- Are there any alternative treatments? What are the benefits and risks of these treatments?
- Will I need medication? If yes: How will it help my condition? What side effects should I be aware of? How long will this treatment take? Can I stop if I'm feeling better?
- What activities, if any, should I avoid?

- Should I be alert for any physical signs and symptoms?
- When should I schedule a follow-up appointment?
- Do you have any literature on my condition?

In addition, you can do your own research to learn about your medical condition. The Internet is a helpful place to look, but be sure to stick with reputable sources of information.

Before and during treatment, make sure you understand what's happening. Ask as many questions as you need to. And if you experience discomfort or side effects, tell your doctor what's happening. Share how you're feeling physically and emotionally.

As an informed health-care consumer, it's worthwhile to keep abreast of what your doctor has written about your condition and treatment. It's OK to request your medical records.

Finally, if you have any concerns about your physician's diagnosis and treatment recommendations, consider getting a second opinion.

This is the first article in a series on health-related issues. By being an informed health-care consumer, OU employees can help contain and reduce benefit costs to the university.

SUMMARY

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