

Pediatric Patient Safety: Keeping Children Safe in the Hospital

Keeping children safe is every parent's priority. Accidental injuries and human errors can happen in spite of the staff's expertise and abilities. The more informed and involved you are in the treatment of your children, the better their hospital experience is likely to be. Here are some ways you can help make your child's hospital stay as safe as possible.

Preparing for the Hospital

- Learn all you can about your child's illness and scheduled treatments. This will help you participate in your child's care and help you to notice any mistakes.
- Seek respected sources for information. Your child's pediatrician and any specialists you are referred to should be your main sources of medical information.

Be sure to ask them about any information you don't understand. Other possible resources include books, websites of trusted groups or associations, and medical organizations (for example, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Lung Association). You may also want to talk to other parents whose children have had your child's condition.

- Get a notebook and write down important information about test results, medications, etc. Ask the doctor or his or her staff to make copies of any important information for you. Take it with you when you go to healthcare appointments. If you have questions, write them down so you won't forget to ask them during your next visit.

Communicate

- Talk with your child's caregivers about your child's health history. Talking with caregivers helps you to make sure they have the right information about important details such as allergic reactions or medication history.
- Bring medical information with you, such as any medications your child takes, how much, and why they take it. If your child has any allergies to medications or food, know what they are and what kind of reaction he or she has. Bring your child's immunization record and make sure it includes the dates when the immunizations were given. Also, know the dates of any previous surgeries or hospitalizations.
- Know your child's caregivers. Make sure your child has been introduced to the people caring for him or her and is as comfortable as possible with them. All staff should wear identification badges that include their pictures. If you don't see such a badge on someone caring for your child, ask to see it.
- Know your child's nurse. He or she helps coordinate your child's care and talks with all the people caring for your child to make sure you and your child receive the highest level of care possible.



- If you don't understand why something is being done, ask. Repeat the caregivers' answers. Make sure you understand their responses, and write them down. If you're not comfortable with any of your child's caretakers or if they seem impatient or too busy to talk with you, seek a caregiver you are more comfortable with. If you are still uncomfortable about how your questions are being answered, contact your hospital's Patient Relations department.
- Remember your rights. You have a right to question anyone involved with your child's care. You have the right to ask for a second opinion or request a transfer to another hospital if you are not satisfied with your child's care. Don't be afraid to challenge any decisions that affect your child.
- Communicate effectively by carrying out discussions in a calm manner and with a sense of humor. Both will help you get your message across better.
- Encourage your child to speak out. You can't be with your child every minute during a hospital stay, but you can let your child know what he or she can do when you're not present. Make your child familiar with as many factors of safety as he or she can understand. Your child is likely to pick up on any anxiety you feel, so try and share safety tips in a matter-of-fact manner.

Patient Identification

- Double-check your child's identification (ID) band. While in the hospital, it's essential for children to wear ID bands with their names and their medical record number.
- Make sure your child understands how important it is not to remove or change the band in any way.
- Check that caregivers look at the ID band before they administer any medication or draw any blood.
- Familiarize yourself with orders the doctor has written for your child as much as possible. If you think medications, foods, or tests should not be given to your child, speak up.

Preparing for Surgery

A child life specialist (a healthcare professional who helps children cope with being in a hospital by providing a variety of play experiences) may be available to help reduce your child's stress and fear of the unknown. Ask your child's medical care team to find out more.

- In the pre-surgery interview with your child's anesthesiologist, mention all health conditions your child has. Include medications, and any allergic reactions, as well as any problems your child or a blood relative has had with any medication. Any of these could seriously affect your child's response to an anesthetic (medication used to put your child to sleep).
- Ask whether the anesthesia professional who conducts your child's presurgery interview is the same one who will perform anesthesia duties in the operating room. If not, ask how they'll make sure that person receives the above information.
- Make sure you and your doctor agree and are clear on exactly what the surgery will include. Encourage the surgeon to mark the area being operated on in your presence.
- Try to be with your child immediately before and after surgery so you can see whether your child's pain or other problems are getting the needed attention.

- After surgery, find out whether your child had any unusual reactions to the anesthetic. Write down this information. This could be important if it's necessary to have surgery in the future.

Reducing Medication Errors

- Tell caregivers about all medications your child takes (including over-the-counter medications such as cold medicines and vitamins) and any allergies he or she may have. Even if you've written these down on a form, remind your child's doctor, especially at the time he or she prescribes new medications. Bad drug reactions can be very serious.
- Tell your doctor if you have given your child any other medicines. This includes herbal or homeopathic medicines, or drug store items such as vitamins, aspirin, and allergy medications. If you have any reason to suspect your child may be taking illegal drugs, please share this too. (The information will remain private.) Any of these could cause dangerous interactions with medications caregivers might give your child.
- If a caregiver is prescribing a new medication for your child, ask about it. Learn its name, what it is used for, the dose, possible side effects, and what it looks like. This applies to intravenous (IV) medications as well as pills and liquids. Double-check to make sure your child's exact weight is marked on the chart. Most medication doses given to children are calculated based on the child's weight, so it is essential that the weight be marked accurately.
- Know what time of day your child is supposed to receive various medications so you can tell someone if the medications are late. Also, make sure different caregivers don't mistakenly repeat a medication after your child has already had a dose. Your child's medical chart shows what has been given. Make sure the nurse checks what was given earlier and writes down what he or she gives your child.
- Tell a nurse immediately if you notice your child having an unexpected reaction to a medication or IV. Alert the nurse if your child reports any pain or burning sensation, shortness of breath or trouble breathing, dizziness, confusion, tightness in the chest, numbness, or itching after receiving medication.

Infection Control

The spread of germs is a possibility in any hospital and is believed to cause thousands of infections every year.

- Monitor hand-washing. Ask your child to wash his or her hands frequently, particularly after every trip to the bathroom or playroom, after visiting with other sick children, and before eating. Also watch that caregivers wash their hands before touching your child. Hands may be washed in the rest rooms with comfortably hot water and soap. Or you may use the antibacterial handwash dispensers, conveniently located throughout the floor.
- Alert the nurse if bedclothes or linens become soiled.
- Ask friends and family who may have colds, respiratory infections, or other infectious illnesses (such as flu, diarrhea, fever, and rash) not to visit your child in the hospital. Minimize visits from young children, who frequently carry germs that can infect others.

Going Home

It's important to continue safe practices after your child is discharged from the hospital.

- Understand your child's treatment plan for home. Ask about any medications she or he will need to continue to take, how quickly the child may return to normal activities, and what signs or symptoms require a quick call to the doctor. If you need to learn to do a special treatment for your child at home, make sure you practice it with your nurse until you are comfortable performing it.
- Take home hospital contact information. Make sure you have the names and phone numbers of hospital staff you should call if you have any questions following discharge.
- Ask when you should bring your child in for a follow-up visit.

Preparing for Emergency Care

Some hospital visits are not planned. Taking your child to the emergency department may be a frightening experience. Preparing for a visit in advance can reduce your anxiety and give your child the best possible Emergency Department experience.

- Carry a wallet card listing your child's health conditions, medications, allergies, and doctors' names and phone numbers. Keep the information updated.

If You Still Have Questions or Concerns

If you have any questions or concerns, please call your hospital and ask to speak with a Patient Relations representative.

Much of the material in this fact sheet came from the Institute for Safe Medication Use in Warminster, PA., and the American Society for Health System Pharmacists.