

# SpeakUP

## HELP PREVENT ERRORS IN YOUR CARE

LABORATORY SERVICES

**E**veryone has a role in making health care safe — physicians, health care executives, laboratory technologists, phlebotomists (people who collect blood), nurses and technicians. Health care organizations across the country are working to make health care safety a priority. You, as the patient, can also play a vital role in making your care safe by becoming an active, involved and informed member of your health care team.

An Institute of Medicine (IOM) report has identified the occurrence of medical errors as a serious problem in the health care system. The IOM recommends, among other things, that a concerted effort be made to improve the public's awareness of the problem.

The "Speak Up" program, sponsored by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, urges patients to get involved in their care. Such efforts to increase consumer awareness and involvement are supported by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. This initiative provides simple advice on how you, as the patient, can make your care a positive experience. After all, research shows that patients who take part in decisions about their health care are more likely to have better outcomes.

**To help prevent  
health care errors,  
patients are  
urged to ...**

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**Joint Commission**  
on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations  
Setting the Standard for Quality in Health Care

**S**peak up if you have questions or concerns, and if you don't understand, ask again. **It's your body and you have a right to know.**

- Your health is too important to worry about being embarrassed if you don't understand something that your doctor, nurse or other health care professional tells you.
- Don't be afraid to ask about safety, quality and timeliness.
- Don't hesitate to tell the health care professional if you think he or she has confused you with another patient.

**P**ay attention to the care you are receiving. **Make sure you're getting the right tests and treatments from the right health care professionals. Don't assume anything.**

- Tell your nurse, doctor, lab technologist or phlebotomist if something doesn't seem quite right.
- Don't be afraid to tell the nurse or the doctor if you think you are about to receive the wrong test. Terminology is very important. For example, if you think you are supposed to receive a "potassium test" and the lab professional calls it a "chemistry panel," speak up immediately. You may want to ask your doctor for a copy of your laboratory orders. This will facilitate your visit to the lab.
- Expect health care workers to introduce themselves when they enter your room or approach you. Look for their identification badges.
- Notice whether your caregivers have washed their hands. Hand washing is the most important way to prevent the spread of infections. Don't be afraid to gently remind a doctor, nurse, lab technologist or phlebotomist to do this. Health care professionals should wear gloves when performing procedures such as collecting blood. Don't hesitate to speak up if the professional does not wear gloves.
- If you are having a blood specimen collected, ask the lab technologist or phlebotomist if you don't understand the procedure.

- Make sure the laboratory confirms your identity by asking you to state your full name as well as another piece of identifying information. Ensure that the specimen is properly labeled with your full name and other identifiers at the time it is collected. If it's a Pap smear, are the slides sealed at the time they are collected to prevent mislabeling or contamination?
- If you are receiving a blood transfusion, make sure the nurse confirms your identification before starting the transfusion.

**E**ducate yourself about the medical tests you are undergoing, your diagnosis and your treatment plan.

- Ask your doctor why he or she selected the laboratory.
- Know how to prepare for the lab test by asking questions about any restrictions, for example, whether you can eat or drink beforehand.
- Gather information about your results. Good sources include your doctor and reference materials or brochures often available at your doctor's office or pharmacy.
- Write down important facts your doctor tells you, so that you can look for additional information later. And ask your doctor if he or she has any written information you can keep.
- Thoroughly read all medical forms and make sure you understand them before you sign anything. If you don't understand, ask your doctor or nurse to explain them.

**A**sk a trusted family member or friend to be your advocate.

- Your advocate can ask questions that you may not think of while you are under stress.
- Ask this person to stay with you at the laboratory or doctor's office or even overnight if you are hospitalized. Your advocate can help to make sure you get the right tests, medications and treatments.
- Your advocate can also help remember answers to questions you have asked, and speak up for you if you cannot.
- Review medical forms with your advocate before you sign them and make sure you both understand exactly what you are agreeing to.
- Make sure your advocate understands the type of care you will need when you get home. Your advocate should know what to look for if your condition is getting worse and whom to call for help.

**K**now your lab results.

- Before you leave the lab, ask about follow-up. What is the time frame for the lab tests to be completed? How will you be informed of the test results? For example, if there was an abnormal test result, will your doctor be notified? Will notification take place by phone?
- Find out how you may obtain a copy of your lab report.
- Don't assume that no news is good news. Always ask about the notification process. Timely communication between your doctor, the lab and the pharmacy can be crucial.
- Ask if there is a telephone number to call if your physician has additional questions.

**U**se a laboratory that has undergone a rigorous on-site evaluation against established, state-of-the-art quality and safety standards, such as that provided by the Joint Commission.

- Ask about the lab's experience in testing. How frequently do they perform the test you need?
- If you have more than one lab or other facility to choose from, ask your doctor which one has the best track record for accuracy and safety.
- Is the facility Joint Commission accredited? You can go to Quality Check at [www.qualitycheck.org](http://www.qualitycheck.org) to find out whether your lab or other health care organization is accredited.

**P**articipate in all decisions about your treatment. **You are the center of the health care team.**

- You and your doctor should agree on exactly what will be done during each step of your care.
- Know who will be taking care of you, how long the treatment will last, and how you should feel.
- Understand that more tests or medications may not always be better. Ask your doctor what a new lab test or medication is likely to achieve.
- Ask for copies of the results from all lab tests to be shared with your health care team. This will give the team a more complete picture of your health history.
- Don't be afraid to seek a second opinion after your lab tests. If you are unsure about the nature of your illness and the best treatment, consult with one or two additional specialists. The more information you have about the options available to you, the more confident you will be in the decisions made.
- Ask to speak with others who have the same diagnosis or have undergone the procedure you are considering. These individuals can help you prepare for the days and weeks ahead. They also can tell you what to expect and what worked best for them.