



# Family Health Care Tips

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## Preventing Medical Errors

*Parents Reaching Out provides resources that focus on helping families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. Keeping your family healthy means knowing how to navigate the health care system and talk with your doctor or other providers. We hope these tip sheets will give you the information you may need to access the best, most cost-effective medical and related services to meet the needs of your family.*

Medical errors are one of the nation's leading causes of death and injury. A recent report by the Institute of Medicine estimates that as many as 44,000 to 98,000 people die in U.S. hospitals each year as the result of medical errors. This means that more people die from medical errors than from motor vehicle accidents, breast cancer, or AIDS.

Errors can involve medicines, surgery, diagnosis, equipment, or lab reports. They can happen during even the most routine tasks. Most errors result from problems created by today's complex health care system, but errors also happen when doctors and their patients have problems communicating. *Here are 20 Tips to help prevent medical errors.*

1. The single most important way you can help prevent errors is to be an active member of the health care team. That means taking part in every decision about your health care. Research shows that patients who are more involved with their care tend to get better results.
2. Make sure that all of the doctors know about everything you are taking. This includes prescription medicines, over-the-counter medicines, and dietary supplements such as vitamins and herbs. At least once a year take all of your medicines and supplements to your doctor. "Brown bagging" the medicines can help you and your doctor talk about them and find out if there are any problems.
3. Make sure your doctor knows about any allergies or adverse reactions you've had to medicines.
4. When your doctor writes a prescription, make sure you can read it.
5. Ask for information about your medicine in terms you can understand-both when the medicines are being prescribed and when you receive them. What is the medicine for? How are you supposed to take it and for how long? What side effects are likely? What are you supposed to do if side effects occur? Is this medicine safe to take with other medicines or dietary supplements? What food, drink, or activities should you avoid while taking this medicine?
6. When you pick up medicine from the pharmacy ask, "Is this the medicine that the doctor prescribed?" One study found that 88 percent of medication errors involved the wrong drug or the wrong dose.
7. Medication labels can be hard to understand. If you have any questions about the directions on the medication label, ask.
8. Ask your pharmacist for the best device to measure liquid medication, and ask how to use the device.
9. Ask for written information about the medication's possible side effects. This way you will be prepared if you have a side effect or if something unexpected happens.



10. If you have a choice, choose a hospital where patients have had the procedure or surgery that you or your child needs. Research shows that patients tend to have better results when they are treated in hospitals that have a great deal of experience with their condition.
11. If a family member is in the hospital, consider asking all health care workers who have direct contact with the person whether they washed their hands. Hand washing is an important way to prevent the spread of infections in hospitals, yet it is not done regularly or thoroughly enough. A recent study found that when patients asked health care workers if they washed their hands, the workers washed their hands more often and used more soap.
12. When your child is being discharged from the hospital, ask the doctor to explain medications, the treatment plan you will use at home, and when your child can get back to regular activities. Research shows that at discharge time doctors think their patients understand more than they really do about what they should or should not do when they return home.
13. If your child is having surgery, make sure that you, the doctor, and the surgeon all agree and are clear on exactly what will be done. Doing surgery at the wrong site is rare, but is 100 percent preventable. The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons urges its members to sign their initials directly on the site to be operated on before surgery.
14. Speak up if you have questions or concerns. You have the right to question anyone who is involved in your care.
15. Make sure that someone, such as a doctor, is in charge of your child's care, especially if your child has many health problems or is in the hospital.
16. Make sure that all of the health professionals involved in your child's care have important health information about your child. Do not assume that everyone knows everything they need to know.
17. Ask a family member or friend to go with you to help you advocate for yourself or your child.
18. Know that "more" is not always better. It is a good idea to find out why a test or treatment is needed and how it will help.
19. If medical tests are done, don't assume that no news is good news. Ask about the results.
20. Ask doctors and nurses about your child's condition and treatment. Learn more from reliable sources. For example, treatment recommendations based on the latest scientific evidence are available from the National Guidelines Clearinghouse at [www.guideline.gov](http://www.guideline.gov). Ask the doctor if your child's treatment is based on the latest evidence.



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[www.ahrq.gov/consumer/20tips/htm](http://www.ahrq.gov/consumer/20tips/htm)

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