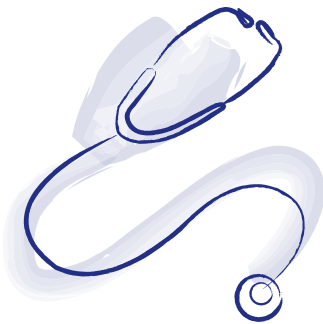
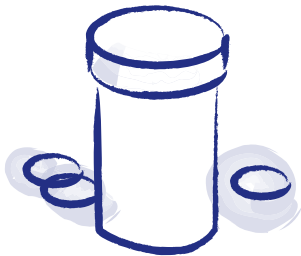


Getting Good Health Care

What to remember when you need medical help



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Choosing a Doctor

Mrs. Wiley had a big surprise the other day when she called her doctor to make an appointment. The receptionist told her that Dr. Horowitz was retiring at the end of the year. After all this time—after decades of flu, bladder infections, and that nasty broken wrist; after helping her through the menopause—now this desertion! Mrs. Wiley didn't know what she would do to try and find a new doctor.

Uncle Willy was grumbling to his nephew Matt. This new managed health insurance plan seemed like a good idea at first, but now he wasn't so sure. What's a primary care doctor anyway? Can't he just continue to see Dr. Bissell for his arthritis? Matt sighed, wondering how he was going to help Uncle Willy find a whole new set of doctors.

Stories like these are becoming all too common. Finding good medical care can be tricky at any age, but for older people this task may be even tougher. Yet, it is important to have a primary care doctor who knows you and all of your health problems. Even if you see other doctors for certain health conditions, for example, a heart specialist (cardiologist) for heart disease, your primary care doctor is needed to work with those specialists and coordinate all of your health care.

Choosing a doctor is one of the most important decisions anyone can make. The best time to make that decision is while you are still healthy and have time to really think about all your choices. If you have no doctor or are thinking of changing doctors, the following ideas may help you find a doctor who is right for you.

What Should You Look for in a Doctor?

Of course you want a doctor who is well trained and competent. A doctor who knows you well may be better able to help you prevent some health problems and manage those that do come up. In choosing a doctor some other things to think about are:

- **Board certification.** Board-certified doctors have extra training after medical school to become specialists in a field of medicine such as family practice, internal medicine, or geriatrics.
- **Communication style.** Because communication is key to good health care, you want a doctor who will listen carefully to your concerns, answer your questions, and explain things clearly and fully.
- **Type of health insurance—**does the doctor accept Medicare predetermined payments?

- The location of the doctor’s office—will it be easy for you to get there?
- Where patients get lab work done—in the doctor’s office or somewhere else?
- Whether the office staff will process your medical insurance claims for you.
- Which hospital the doctor uses to treat patients.
- Whether the doctor works with a group of other doctors. If so, who are the others, and what are their specialties?
- Who covers for the doctor if he/she is out of town or not available?
- Whether, with your permission, the doctor will share information with a family member.
- Which languages the doctor speaks.

A good first step is to make a list of the things that matter most to you. Then, go back over your list, and rank them in order of importance.

What Type of Doctor?

For your primary care doctor, you might want a general or family practitioner, an internist, or a geriatrician.

- General practitioners provide health care for a wide range of medical problems. They do not focus on any one area of medicine.
- Family practitioners are similar to general practitioners, with extra training to focus on health care for all family members, regardless of age.

- An internist is a doctor for adults. Some internists take additional training to become specialists. For example, cardiologists are internists who specialize in diseases of the heart.
- Geriatricians specialize in the care of older adults. A geriatrician is trained in family practice or internal medicine, but has additional training in caring for older people.

How Does Managed Care Affect Your Choice of Doctors?

Most people age 65 and older are eligible for Medicare hospital insurance (Part A). They also can enroll in Medicare medical insurance (Part B) for a monthly fee.

Medicare medical insurance helps pay for visits to the doctor. It also covers many other medical services and supplies not covered by Medicare’s Part A.

Many older people use Medicare’s original fee-for-service health insurance program. Under this program, you may see any doctor or health care provider you choose. You usually pay Medicare’s deductible and co-insurance, along with any other charges not covered by Medicare. Medicare pays the rest. Under this plan, you handle bills and payments.

Another option is a Medicare managed care plan. When you enroll in a managed care plan, you choose your doctor from a list of primary care doctors who are part



of that plan's network. Your primary care doctor then coordinates all of your health care needs. If you do not choose a primary care doctor, the managed care plan will assign one to you.

In some managed care plans, you can see a doctor outside the network, but it will cost you more money. Also, you may have to pay a co-payment for some services and visits.

Today, there are many different kinds of managed care plans. Their benefits, costs, and rules vary. Be sure to compare each plan and consider the type of insurance (fee-for-service vs. managed care) that is best for you.

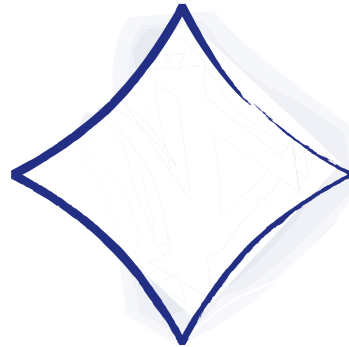
For information about Medicare benefits, call the Social Security Administration office listed in your phone book. Or call the toll-free Medicare hotline at 800-MEDICARE (800-633-4227). Information about Medicare eligibility, enrollment, insurance plans, and more is also available online at www.medicare.gov.

Finding a New Doctor

Once you have a sense of what you want in a doctor, ask people you know about doctors they use and like. Friends, coworkers, and other health professionals may be helpful. You can make it easy for them to tell you about the doctors they like by asking questions,

such as, "What do you like about Dr. Smith?"

A doctor whose name comes up often might be a strong possibility as a choice. It may help to have several names to choose from in case the doctor you select is not taking new patients or does not take part in your health insurance plan.



If you belong to a managed care plan, you can get a list of doctors from the plan's membership services office. Your choices will be limited to those doctors who are part of the plan.

If you need more help finding names of doctors, contact your hospital of choice, local medical society, local physician referral services, nearby medical schools, or university medical centers in your area.

How Do You Make an Informed Choice?

Once you have chosen two or three doctors, call their offices. The office staff can give you information about the doctor's education and training. They also can tell you about office policies, standard insurance the office takes, payment methods, and the doctor's hospital admitting privileges.

You may want to make an appointment just to talk with a doctor before deciding on a final choice. Make sure that she or he

knows that you are trying to decide on a doctor. You likely will be charged for such a visit; your insurance company may not pay for it.

Make a list of questions you want to ask the doctor. For example:

- What age groups make up most of your practice?
- How do you manage patients with lots of health problems? Do you usually treat everything, do you refer patients, or are there some problems older people just have to live with?
- What do you think are the most important preventive care issues for older adults? How do you manage them?
- What's the best way for me to prepare for an office visit with you? For example, should I bring my questions in writing?
- Would you provide your instructions in writing for me?
- May I bring a family member (spouse, daughter, or son) to my office visits with you?
- If I give you permission, are you comfortable talking with my family about my condition?
- How do you involve your patients in health care decisions?
- Do you see many patients with the same chronic health problem that I have (for example, diabetes)?

After the meeting, ask yourself if you felt comfortable and confident with

this doctor. Were you at ease asking questions? Did the doctor clearly answer your questions? If you are not sure, schedule a visit with one of the other doctors on your list.

The First Appointment

After choosing a doctor, make your first medical appointment. During this visit, the doctor will probably take a medical history and ask questions about your health. There may be questions about the health of your family members as well. The doctor also will examine you. Be sure to bring your past medical records (or have them sent). Also bring all of the medicines you take with you to show the doctor. Include both prescription and over-the-counter drugs, even vitamins, supplements, and eye drops. Make a list of any drug allergies or serious drug reactions you've had. During this visit take time to ask any questions you may still have about the doctor and the practice.



Once you have found a doctor you like, your job is not finished. A good doctor-patient relationship is a partnership. Both you and your doctor need to work together to solve your medical problems and maintain your good health. Finding a medical practice that is well suited to your needs is an important first step. Good communication with the doctor and the office staff is the key.

For More Information The following organizations may be able to help you find a doctor:

American Geriatrics Society (AGS)

The Empire State Building
350 Fifth Avenue, Suite 801
New York, NY 10118
www.americangeriatrics.org

- AGS Referral Phone Line:
800-247-4779 (toll-free)

American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine

190 North Independence
Mall West
Philadelphia, PA 19106-1572
800-523-1546 (toll-free)
www.acponline.org

American Academy of Family Physicians

11400 Tomahawk Creek Parkway
Leawood, KS 66211
800-274-2237 (toll-free)
www.aafp.org

American Medical Association

515 North State Street
Chicago, IL 60610
800-621-8335 (toll-free)
www.ama-assn.org

American Osteopathic Association

142 East Ontario Street
Chicago, IL 60611
800-621-1773 (toll-free)
www.osteopathic.org

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore MD 21244-1850
800-633-4227 (toll-free)
www.medicare.gov

For more information about health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
800-222-2225 (toll-free)
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

- To order publications (in English or Spanish) online, visit www.niapublications.org.
- The National Institute on Aging website is www.nia.nih.gov.
- Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This simple-to-use website features popular health topics for older adults. It has large type and a “talking” function that reads the text out loud.

September 2002

Considering Surgery?

Have you been told that you need to have surgery? If so, you are not alone. Millions of older Americans have surgery each year.

Most surgeries are not emergencies. You have time to find out as much as possible about the surgery, think the matter over, and review other options. You also have time to get a second opinion.

Questions to Ask

Deciding to have surgery can be difficult, but an informed decision may be easier to make once you know why surgery is necessary and whether there are other treatment choices. Your surgeon can help. Talk with your surgeon about your condition and the surgery recommended.

Don't hesitate to ask the surgeon any questions you might have. For example, do the benefits of surgery outweigh the risks?

Your surgeon should welcome your questions. If you don't understand something, ask the surgeon to explain it more clearly. The answers to the following questions will help you become informed and make the best decision.

- What surgery is recommended?
- Why do I need surgery?
- Can another treatment be tried instead of surgery?
- What if I don't have the surgery?

- How will the surgery affect my health and lifestyle?
- Are there any activities that I won't be able to do after surgery?
- How long will it take to recover?
- How much experience has the surgeon had doing this kind of surgery?
- Where will the surgery be done—in the hospital, the doctor's office, a special surgical center, or a day surgery unit of a hospital?
- What kind of anesthesia will be used? What are the side effects and risks of having anesthesia?
- Is there anything else I should know about this surgery?

Choosing a Surgeon

Your primary care doctor may recommend a surgeon to you. You also may want to identify another independent surgeon to get a second opinion.

One way to reduce the risk of surgery is to choose a surgeon who has been thoroughly trained to do the type of surgery you need and who has plenty of experience doing it. Be sure to ask about your surgeon's qualifications. For example, you may want to find out if your surgeon is certified by a surgical board that is approved by the American Board of Medical Specialties (such as the American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery, the American

Board of Colon and Rectal Surgery, or other national surgical board). Surgeons who are board certified have successfully completed training and passed exams for their specialty.

The letters “FACS” after a surgeon’s name tell you that he or she is a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons. Fellows are almost always board-certified surgeons who have passed a test of their surgical training and skills; they also have shown their commitment to high standards of ethical conduct.

Don’t hesitate to call the doctor’s office and ask for this information. Your state or local medical society and the hospital where the surgeon operates also should be able to verify his or her training. Try to choose an experienced surgeon who operates regularly (several times a week) and who has treated a problem like yours before.

Getting a Second Opinion

Getting a second opinion from another surgeon is a good way to make sure that having surgery is the best choice for you. Many people are uneasy about seeking another opinion. They worry that they might offend their doctor. However, getting a second opinion is a common medical practice. Most doctors encourage it.

Getting a second opinion is a good way to get additional expert advice from another doctor who knows a lot about treating your particular medical problem. In addition, a second opinion can reassure you that your decision to have surgery is the right one.

Don’t be afraid to tell your surgeon that you want another opinion and that you would like your medical records sent to the second doctor. This can save time, money, and possible discomfort since tests that you’ve already had may not need to be repeated if the second doctor has the results.

When getting another opinion, tell the second doctor your symptoms, the type of surgery that has been recommended, and the results of any tests you’ve already had. Ask the second doctor the same questions you asked the first one about the benefits and risks of surgery.

Medicare and many private health insurance companies will help pay for a second opinion. Most Medicaid programs also pay for a second opinion. If the second doctor agrees that surgery is needed, he or she usually will refer you back to the first doctor for the surgery.

If the second doctor disagrees with the first, you may feel you have enough information to decide what to do, you may wish to talk again with the first surgeon, or you may wish to see a third doctor. Your primary care doctor also may be able to help you decide what to do.

Informed Consent

Before having surgery, you’ll be asked to give consent. It’s important to discuss all of your concerns about your condition and the surgery with your surgeon before you sign this form. In most cases, your surgeon will volunteer a great deal of information, but don’t hesitate to ask any questions you

still have. Your doctor should be willing to take whatever time is necessary to make sure that you are fully informed.

Paying for Surgery

Before your surgery, ask about your surgeon's fees. Many surgeons volunteer this information; if yours doesn't, don't hesitate to ask. You can find out about hospital rates from the hospital business office. Your doctor should be able to tell you how long you can expect to be in the hospital. Today, many types of surgery can be performed without hospitalization. Your surgeon will be able to decide if that's possible in your case.

In addition to surgeons' fees and the costs of hospitalization, you also will be billed for the professional services of others involved in your care such as the anesthesiologist and medical consultants.

You may want to check your health insurance plan to see what portion of the costs you'll have to pay. You probably will need approval from your health insurance plan before surgery. If your insurance plan will not pay all of the anticipated costs and you cannot afford the difference, discuss this situation frankly with your surgeon.

Most people 65 and older have Medicare health insurance, which has two parts: Part A (hospital insurance) and Part B (medical insurance). Medicare Part A helps pay your hospital bill. It covers a semiprivate room, meals, general nursing, and other hospital services and supplies. It does not pay for private duty nursing, a television or telephone in your room, or a private room, unless medically necessary. For more information about Medicare coverage, call the toll-free helpline at 800-MEDICARE (800-633-4227).

For More Information

The organizations listed below offer more information about some of the topics mentioned in this fact sheet:

American College of Surgeons
633 North Saint Clair Street
Chicago, IL 60611-3211
800-621-4111 (toll-free)
312-202-5000
www.facs.org

American Society of Anesthesiologists
520 Northwest Highway
Park Ridge, IL 60068-2573
847-825-5586
www.asahq.org

For more information about health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center
P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
800-222-2225 (toll-free)
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

- To order publications (in English or Spanish) online, visit www.niapublications.org.
- The National Institute on Aging website is www.nia.nih.gov.

- Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseiorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This simple-to-use website features popular health topics for older adults. It has large type and a "talking" function that reads the text out loud.

February 2000

Health Quackery: Spotting Health Scams

You see the ads everywhere these days—“Smart Drugs for Long Life” or “Arthritis Aches and Pains Disappear Like Magic!” or even testimonials claiming, “This treatment cured my cancer in one week.” It’s easy to understand the appeal of these promises. But there is still plenty of truth to the old saying, “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!”

Quacks—people who sell unproven remedies—have been around for years. Today they have more ways than ever to peddle their wares. In addition to TV, radio, magazines, newspapers, infomercials, mail, and even word-of-mouth, they now can use the Internet—websites offer miracle cures; e-mails tell stories of overnight magic. Sadly, older people are often the target for such scams. In fact, a government study found that most victims of health care fraud are over age 65.

The problem is serious. Unproven remedies may be harmful. They may also waste money. And, sometimes, using these remedies keeps people from getting the medical treatment they need.

What Do Quacks Promise?

Unproven remedies promise false hope. Often they offer cures that are painless or quick. Why do people fall for these

sales pitches? After all, at best these treatments are worthless. At worst, they are dangerous. One reason health care scams work is that they prey on people who are frightened or in pain. Living with a chronic health problem is hard. It’s easy to see why people might fall for a false promise of a quick and painless cure.

You may see unproven remedies in products for:

Anti-Aging. Claims for pills or treatments that lead to eternal youth play on the great value our culture places on staying young. But, aging is normal. A product may smooth your wrinkles, but no treatments have yet been proven to slow the aging process. Eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise, and not smoking are your best bets to help prevent some of the diseases that occur more often with age. In other words, making healthy lifestyle choices can increase your chances of aging well.

Arthritis Remedies. Unproven arthritis remedies can be easy to fall for because symptoms of arthritis tend to come and go. You may believe the remedy you are using is making you feel better when, in fact, it is just the normal ebb and flow of your symptoms. You may see claims that so-called treatments with herbs, oils, chemicals, special diets, radiation, and other products cured arthritis. This is

highly unlikely. Individual testimonials alone do not guarantee that a product is effective. Instead, scientific studies proving that a treatment works are needed. While these products may not hurt you, they are costly and aren't likely to help much either. There is no cure for most forms of arthritis, but rest, exercise, heat, and drugs can help many people control their symptoms. If you are thinking about a new treatment, talk with your doctor first.

Cancer Cures. Quacks prey on people's fear of cancer. They promote treatments with no proven value—for example, a diet dangerously low in protein or drugs such as Laetrile. By using unproven methods, people with cancer may lose valuable time and the chance to receive a proven, effective treatment. This delay may lessen the chance for controlling or curing the disease.

Memory Aids. Many people worry about losing their memory as they age. They may wrongly believe false promises that unproven treatments can help them keep or improve their memory. So-called smart pills, removal of amalgam dental fillings, and brain retraining exercises are all examples of untested approaches that claim to help memory.

How Can You Protect Yourself From Health Scams?

Be wary. Question what you see or hear in ads or on the Internet. Newspapers,

magazines, radio, and TV stations do not always check to make sure the claims in their ads are true. Find out about a product before you buy. Don't let a sales person force you to make a snap decision. Check with your doctor first.

Remember stories about the old snake oil salesman who traveled from town to town making claims for his fabulous product? Well, chances are today's quack is using the same sales tricks. Look for red flags in ads or promotional material that:



- Promise a quick or painless cure,
 - Claim to be made from a special, secret, or ancient formula—often only available by mail or from one sponsor,
 - Use testimonials or undocumented case histories from satisfied patients,
 - Claim to be effective for a wide range of ailments,
- Claim to cure a disease (such as arthritis or cancer) that is not yet understood by medical science,
- Offer an additional “free” gift or a larger amount of the product as a “special promotion,” or
- Require advance payment and claim limited availability of the product.

For More Information

If you have questions about a product, talk to your doctor or contact one of the organizations below. Get the facts about health products and protect yourself from health care hoaxes:

National Cancer Institute (NCI) Cancer Information Service (CIS)

800-422-6237 (toll-free)
800-332-8615 (TTY/toll-free)
www.cancer.gov

National Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NIAMS)

1 AMS Circle
Bethesda, MD 20892
877-226-4267 (toll-free)
301-565-2966 (TTY)
www.niams.nih.gov

Council of Better Business Bureaus (CBBB)

4200 Wilson Boulevard
8th Floor
Arlington, VA 22203
www.bbb.org

- Check the telephone book for the number of your local chapter.

Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

6th Street and Pennsylvania
Avenue, NW
Room 421
Washington, DC 20580
877-382-4357 (toll-free)
800-326-2996 (TTY/toll-free)
www.ftc.gov

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857-0001
888-463-6332 (toll-free)
www.fda.gov

United States Postal Inspection Service (USPS)

Office of Investigation
Washington, DC 20206-2166
www.usps.com/postalinspectors/fraud/

- Check the telephone book for the number of your local postal inspector.

Quackwatch, Inc.

www.quackwatch.org

- Quackwatch, Inc, is a nonprofit corporation making information available to combat health-related frauds, myths, fads, and fallacies.

For more information about health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
800-222-2225 (toll-free)
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

- To order publications (in English or Spanish) online, visit www.niapublications.org.
- The National Institute on Aging website is www.nia.nih.gov.
- Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This simple-to-use website features popular health topics for older adults. It has large type and a “talking” function that reads the text out loud.

September 2002

Hospital Hints

Going to the hospital is somewhat like traveling to another country—the sights are unfamiliar and the people you meet there often speak a foreign language. No matter what the reason for the trip—whether it’s an overnight visit for a few tests or a longer stay for medical treatment or major surgery—nearly everyone worries about entering the hospital. Learning more about hospitals and the people who work there may help make your hospital stay less stressful.

The following hints are meant for people who plan to enter the hospital by choice rather than for those who go to the hospital because of an emergency. (Information about emergency care is at the end of this *Age Page*.) Relatives and friends of patients who are admitted to the hospital also may find this information useful.

What to Bring

It’s best to pack as little as you can. However, be sure to bring the following items:

- Nightclothes, bathrobe, and sturdy slippers (label all personal items),
- Comfortable clothes to wear home,
- A toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo, comb and brush, deodorant, and razor,
- A list of your medicines, including prescription and over-the-counter drugs,
- Details of past illnesses, surgeries, and any allergies,
- Your health insurance card,
- A list of the names and telephone numbers (home and business) of family members to contact in an emergency, and
- Ten dollars or less for newspapers, magazines, or other items you may wish to buy in the hospital gift shop.

What to Leave Home

Leave jewelry (including wedding rings, earrings, and watches), credit cards, and checkbooks at home or have a family member or friend keep them for you. If you must bring valuables, ask if they can be kept in the hospital safe during your stay. In addition, leave electric razors, hair dryers, and curling irons at home.

Admission

Your first stop in the hospital will be the admitting office. Here you’ll sign forms allowing the hospital staff to treat you and to release medical information to your insurance company. You also will be asked about advance directives (explained later in this *Age Page*).

Most people 65 and older have Medicare health insurance, which has two parts: Part A (hospital insurance) and Part B (medical insurance). Medicare Part A helps pay for care in hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, and hospices, as well as some home health care. It covers a

semiprivate room, meals, general nursing, and other hospital services and supplies. It does not pay for private duty nursing, a television or telephone in your room, or a private room, unless medically necessary. For more information about Medicare coverage, call the toll-free helpline at 800-MEDICARE (800-633-4227).

If you don't have health insurance, an admissions counselor can advise you about other payment methods and sources of financial aid, such as the Hill-Burton program. Hill-Burton hospitals provide free or below-cost health care to people unable to pay. Eligibility for these free services is based on family size and income. For more information, call the Hill-Burton hotline at 800-638-0742; Maryland residents should call 800-492-0359.

Hospital Staff

Once you've filled out all the forms, you'll be taken to your room. You will then begin to meet the health professionals who will care for you while you're in the hospital.

Doctors are in charge of your overall care. You'll have an attending physician, who may be your primary doctor, a doctor on the hospital staff to whom you've been referred, or a specialist. In a teaching hospital (where doctors train), several doctors care for each patient. For example, the attending physician directs the house staff—medical students, residents (doctors who have recently graduated from medical school), and fellows (doctors who receive training in a special area of medicine or surgery after their residency training).

Nurses—registered nurses, nurse practitioners, licensed practical nurses, nurse's aides, and nursing students—provide many patient-care services. For example, nurses give medicines, check vital signs (blood pressure, temperature, and pulse), provide treatments, and teach patients to care for themselves. The head nurse coordinates nursing care for each patient on the unit (the floor or section of the hospital where your room is located).

Physical therapists teach patients how to build muscles, increase flexibility, and improve coordination. They may use exercise, heat, cold, or water therapy to help patients whose ability to move is limited.

Occupational therapists work with patients to restore, maintain, or increase their ability to perform daily tasks such as cooking, eating, bathing, and dressing.

Respiratory therapists prevent and treat breathing problems. For example, they teach patients exercises to help prevent lung infections after surgery.

Technicians perform a variety of tests such as x-rays and procedures such as taking blood.

Dietitians help plan specialized menus for patients and teach them how to plan a well-balanced diet.

Pharmacists know the chemical makeup and correct use of drugs. They prepare the medicines used in the hospital.

Social workers offer support to patients and their families. They can help patients and families learn about home care, social services, and support groups.

Discharge planners help patients arrange for health and home care needs after they go home from the hospital.

Geriatric Assessment

Some older people have many health problems that threaten their ability to live on their own after they leave the hospital. In some hospitals, a team that includes a doctor, nurse, and social worker addresses the special needs of older patients. This team also may include other specialists and therapists. The team performs a thorough exam, called a geriatric assessment, to learn about the patient's physical and mental health, family life, income, living arrangements, access to community services, and ability to perform daily tasks. The team diagnoses health problems and develops a plan to help older patients get the health care and social services they need.

Hospital Geography

Hospitals have many patient-care areas. For example, patients may be in a private (one-bed) or semiprivate (two-bed) room. The intensive care unit (also called the ICU) has special equipment and staff to care for very ill patients. The coronary care unit (CCU) gives intensive medical care to patients with severe heart disease. In both the ICU and CCU, visiting hours are strictly limited and usually only family members are allowed to see patients. Surgery is done in the operating room (OR). After an operation, patients spend time in the recovery room before going back to their own room.

In the emergency room (ER), trained staff treat life-threatening injuries or illnesses. Patients who are badly hurt or very sick are seen first. Because the ER is so busy, less seriously ill patients may have to wait before they are seen by an emergency medical technician, nurse, or doctor.

Safety Tips

Because you may feel weak or tired, please take a few extra safety steps while in the hospital:

- Use the call bell or button when you need help.
- Use the controls to lower your bed before getting in or out.
- Be careful not to trip over the wires and tubes that may be around the bed.
- Try to keep the things you need within easy reach.
- Take only prescribed medicines. If you bring your own medicines with you, tell your nurse or doctor. Don't take other drugs without your doctor's permission.
- Hold on to grab bars for support when getting in and out of the bathtub or shower.
- Use handrails on stairways and in hallways.

Questions

During your hospital stay, you'll probably have many questions about your care. Always feel free to ask your doctor these questions. Your doctor is there to help you get the care you need and to discuss your

concerns. Your nurse or social worker also may be able to answer many of your questions or help you get the information you need.

You may find it useful to write down your questions as you think of them. For example, you may want to ask your doctor or nurse some or all of the following questions:

- What will this test tell you? Why is it needed, and when will you know the results?
- What treatment is needed, and how long will it last?
- What are the benefits and risks of treatment?
- When can I go home?
- When I go home, will I have to change my regular activities or my diet?
- How often will I need checkups?
- Is any other follow-up needed?

Patient Rights

You can decide in advance what medical treatments you want or don't want in the hospital in case you lose your ability to speak for yourself. You can do this by preparing something called an advance directive. In an advance directive, you tell people how to make medical decisions for you when you can't make them for yourself. You also can name someone else to make medical decisions for you. Two common advance directives are a living will and a durable power of attorney for health care.

In a living will, you write down the kind of medical care you want (or don't want)

in case you are unable to make your own decisions. It's called a living will because it takes effect while you are still alive.

In a durable power of attorney for health care, you name someone else (a family member or friend, for example) to make medical decisions for you if you are unable to make them for yourself. You also can include instructions about any treatment you want to avoid.

If you have an advance directive, tell your family and make sure they know where it's located. Also, tell your doctor and make sure that the advance directive is part of your medical records. If you have a durable power of attorney for health care, give a copy to the person you've chosen to act on your behalf.

If you need help to prepare an advance directive or if you would like more information about them, contact your doctor or lawyer. You also can consult your State Attorney General's Office or State Office on Aging.

Discharge Planning

Before going home, you'll need discharge orders from your doctor and a release form from the hospital business office. Discharge planning before leaving the hospital can help you prepare for your health and home care needs after you go home. The discharge planner can help you arrange for a visiting nurse, hospital equipment, meals-on-wheels, or other services. The discharge planner also knows about senior centers, rehabilitation centers, nursing homes, and other long-term care services.

In Case of Emergency

In a medical emergency, every second counts! You may have severe pain, a bad injury, or sudden severe illness. In such a life-threatening emergency, seek medical help right away. In many areas, you can reach emergency help by calling 911 or the telephone operator. Be sure to tell the operator the type of emergency and your location.

When you need care for a sudden illness or injury that you don't think is an emergency, call your doctor or urgent care center. Often a visit to the emergency room (ER) isn't needed. If you do need to go to the ER, your doctor can make things easier for you by calling the hospital to let them know you are coming.

If there is time, try to take the following items with you to the ER:

- Your health insurance card or policy number,
- Your doctor's name and telephone number,
- A list of the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter drugs, and
- The names and telephone numbers of close family members.

It's a good idea to write this information on a note card and carry it in your wallet or purse. If you have a medical problem such as epilepsy, diabetes, or allergies, you should wear an ID bracelet or carry an ID card to let rescue workers and hospital staff know about these hidden conditions.

If possible, ask a relative or friend to go to the hospital with you for support.

For More Information

The organizations listed below offer more information about some of the topics mentioned in this fact sheet:

The American Hospital Association provides information about hospitals and patient rights. Their address is:

American Hospital Association
One North Franklin
Chicago, IL 60606
312-422-3000
www.aha.org

For more information about health and aging, contact:

**National Institute on Aging
Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
800-222-2225 (toll-free)
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

- To order publications (in English or Spanish) online, visit www.niapublications.org.
- The National Institute on Aging website is www.nia.nih.gov.

- Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This simple-to-use website features popular health topics for older adults. It has large type and a "talking" function that reads the text out loud.

February 2000

Medicines: Use Them Safely

People age 65 and older consume more prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines than any other age group. Older people tend to have more long-term, chronic illnesses—such as arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease—than do younger people. Because they may have a number of diseases or disabilities at the same time, it is common for older people to take many different drugs.

Many older people owe their health in part to new and improved medicines and vaccines. But using medicines may be riskier for older adults, especially when several medicines are used at one time. Taking different medicines is not always easy to do right. It may be hard to remember what each medicine is for, how you should take it, and when you should take it. This is especially true of people with memory problems or dementia.

Medicines may act differently in older people than in younger people. This may be because of normal changes in the body that happen with age. For instance, as we get older, we lose water and lean tissue (mainly muscle) and we gain more fat tissue. This can make a difference in how long a drug stays in the body.

The kidneys and liver are two important organs that process and remove most drugs from the body. As we age, these organs may not work as well as they used to and drugs may leave more slowly.

Keep in mind that “drugs” can mean both medicines prescribed by your doctor and

over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, which you buy without a doctor’s prescription. OTCs can include vitamins and minerals, herbal and dietary supplements, laxatives, cold medicines, and antacids. Taking some OTCs together with prescription medicines can cause serious problems. For example, aspirin should not be taken with warfarin (Coumadin). Be sure your doctor knows what medicines you are taking and assures you that it is safe for you to take your medicines together. Also ask about taking your medicines with food. If you take alendronate (Fosamax) with food, for example, the drug will be less effective. Herbal supplements also should be taken with care. Gingko biloba, for instance, should not be taken with aspirin, acetaminophen, warfarin, or thiazide diuretics because it may increase blood pressure and the risk of bleeding problems.

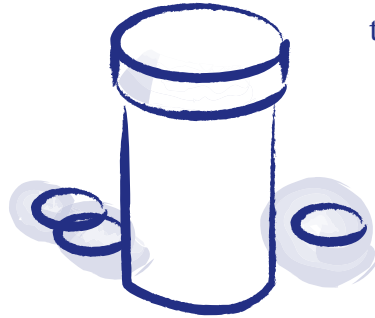
You and your family should learn about the medicines that you take and their possible side effects. Remember, medicines that are strong enough to cure you can also be strong enough to hurt you if they aren’t used correctly. Here are some hints to help avoid risks and get the best results from your medicines:

At Home

- DO keep a daily checklist of all the medicines you take. Include both prescription and OTC medicines. Note the name of each medicine, the doctor

who prescribed it, the amount you take, and the times of day you take it. Keep a copy in your medicine cabinet and one in your wallet or pocketbook.

- DO read and save any written information that comes with the medicine.
- DO check the label on your medicine before taking it to make sure that it is for the correct person—you—with the correct directions prescribed for you by your doctor.
- DO take medicine in the exact amount and precise schedule your doctor prescribes.
- DO check the expiration dates on your medicine bottles and throw away medicine that has expired.
- DO call your doctor right away if you have any problems with your medicines or if you are worried that the medicine might be doing more harm than good. He or she may be able to change your medicine to another one that will work just as well.
- DO NOT take medicines prescribed for another person or give yours to someone else.
- DO NOT stop taking a prescription drug unless your doctor says it's okay—even if you are feeling better.
- DO NOT take more or less than the prescribed amount of any medicine.
- DO NOT mix alcohol and medicine unless your doctor says it's okay. Some medicines may not work well or may make you sick if taken with alcohol.



At Your Doctor's Office

- DO review your medicine record with the doctor or nurse at every visit and whenever your doctor prescribes new medicine. Your doctor may have new information about your medicines that might be important to you.
 - DO always tell your doctor or nurse about past problems you have had with medicines, such as rashes, indigestion, dizziness, or not feeling hungry.
 - DO always ask your doctor or nurse about the right way to take any medicine before you start to use it.
- DO ask these questions (and write down the answers) before leaving your doctor's office:
 - What is the name of the medicine, and why am I taking it?
 - What is the name of the condition this medicine will treat?
 - How does this medicine work?
 - How often should I take it?
 - How long will it take to work?
 - How will I know if this medicine is working?
 - How can I expect to feel once I start taking this medicine?
 - When should I take it? As needed? Before, with, or between meals? At bedtime?
 - If I forget to take it, what should I do?
 - What side effects might I expect? Should I report them?
 - How long will I have to take it?

- Can this medicine interact with other medicines (prescription and OTCs including herbal and dietary supplements) that I am taking now?
- If I don't take medicine, is there anything else that would work as well?

At the Pharmacy

- DO make sure you can read and understand the medicine name and the

directions on the container. If the label is hard to read, ask your pharmacist to use larger type. Let your pharmacist know if you have trouble opening the medicine bottle.

- DO check the label on your medicine before leaving the pharmacy to make sure that it is for the correct person—you—and with the correct directions prescribed for you by your doctor. If not, tell the pharmacist.

For More Information The organizations listed below offer more information about some of the topics mentioned in this fact sheet:

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Consumer Affairs Office has more information about safe use of medicines.

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
5600 Fishers Lane
HFD-210
Rockville, MD 20857
888-463-6332 (toll-free)
www.fda.gov

The Peter Lamy Center for Drug Therapy and Aging has brochures and information about medication use in the elderly. Contact:

University of Maryland School of Pharmacy
20 North Pine Street
Baltimore, MD 21201
410-706-7650

For more information about health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
800-222-2225 (toll-free)
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

- To order publications (in English or Spanish) online, visit www.niapublications.org.
- The National Institute on Aging website is www.nia.nih.gov.
- Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This simple-to-use website features popular health topics for older adults. It has large type and a “talking” function that reads the text out loud.

August 2000

Online Health Information: Can You Trust It?

A group of older adults are gathered for their weekly computer class. They are learning to use the Internet to find health information. Maria's husband, who is 75, had a stroke the month before so she's searching the Web for some basic facts about stroke rehabilitation. Walter, who is 68, has questions about what causes Alzheimer's disease because he thinks that's what his mother had. Shirley and Howard, married for 48 years, are trying to find out if the cataract surgery their eye doctor suggests really is as safe as he says. The whole group had one big worry—"How can we trust the health information we get on the Internet?"

There are thousands of health-related websites on the Internet. Some of the information on these websites is reliable and can be trusted. Some of it is not. Some of the information is current. Some of it is not. Choosing which website to trust is worth thinking about.

How Do I Find Reliable Health Information Online?

As a rule, health websites sponsored by Federal Government agencies are good sources of health information. You can reach all Federal websites by visiting www.firstgov.gov. Large professional organizations and well-known medical schools may also be good sources of health information.

The main page of a website is called the home page. The home page shows you

the features on the website. You should be able to spot the name of the sponsor of the website right away.

Places to Start

There are a few good places to start if you are looking for online health information. An excellent source of reliable information is the National Institutes of Health (www.nih.gov). You can start here to find information on almost every health topic, including:

- Managing heart disease (www.nhlbi.nih.gov)
- Dealing with deafness (www.nidcd.nih.gov)
- Taking care of dentures (www.nidcr.nih.gov)
- Caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease (www.nia.nih.gov).

In addition, you can visit the National Library of Medicine’s Medline Plus (www.medlineplus.gov) for dependable information on over 600 health-related topics.

You can also visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseniorhealth.gov)—a website with health information designed specifically for older people.

What Questions Should I Ask?

As you search online, you are likely to find websites for many health agencies and organizations that are not well-known. By answering the following questions you should be able to find more information about these websites. A lot of these details may be found under the heading, “About Us” or “Contact Us”.

1. *Who sponsors the website? Can you easily identify the sponsor?*

Websites cost money—is the funding source readily apparent? Sometimes the website address itself may help—for example:

- .gov identifies a government agency,
- .edu identifies an educational institution,
- .org identifies professional organizations (e.g., scientific or research societies, advocacy groups), and
- .com identifies commercial websites (e.g., businesses, pharmaceutical companies, sometimes hospitals).

2. *Is it obvious how you can reach the sponsor?*

Trustworthy websites will have contact information for you to use. They often have a toll-free telephone number. The website home page should list an e-mail address, phone number, or a mailing address where the sponsor and/or the authors of the information can be reached.

3. *Who wrote the information?*

Authors and contributors should be identified. Their affiliation and any financial interest in the content should also be clear. Be careful about testimonials. Personal stories may be helpful, but medical advice offered in a case history should be considered with a healthy dose of skepticism. There is a big difference between a website developed by a person with a financial interest in a topic versus a website developed using strong scientific evidence. Reliable health information comes from scientific research that has been conducted in government, university, or private laboratories.

4. *Who reviews the information? Does the website have an editorial board?*

Click on the “About Us” page to see if there is an editorial board that checks the information before putting it online. Find out if the editorial board members are experts in the subject you are researching. For example, an advisory board made up of attorneys and accountants is not medically authoritative. Some websites have a section called, “About Our Writers” instead of an editorial policy. Dependable websites will tell you where the health information came from and how it has been reviewed.

5. *When was the information written?*

New research findings can make a difference in making medically smart choices. So, it's important to find out when the information you are reading was written. Look carefully on the home page to find out when the website was last updated. The date is often found at the bottom of the home page. Remember: older information isn't useless. Many websites provide older articles so readers can get an historical view of the information.

6. *Is your privacy protected? Does the website clearly state a privacy policy?*

This is important because, sadly, there is fraud on the Internet. Take time to read the website's policy—if the website says something like, “We share information with companies that can provide you with products,” that's a sign your information isn't private. Do not give out your Social Security number. If you are asked for personal information, be sure to find out how the information is being used by contacting the website sponsor by phone, mail, or the “Contact Us” feature on the website. Be careful when buying things on the Internet. Websites without security may not protect your credit card or bank account information. Look for information saying that a website has a “secure server” before purchasing anything online.

7. *Does the website make claims that seem too good to be true? Are quick, miraculous cures promised?*

Be careful of claims that any one remedy will cure a lot of different illnesses. Be skeptical of sensational writing or dramatic cures.

Make sure you can find other websites with the same information. Don't be fooled by a long list of links—any website can link to another, so no endorsement can be implied from a shared link.

A Quick Checklist

You can use the following checklist to help make sure that the health information you are reading online can be trusted. You might want to keep this checklist by your computer.

- 1. Can you easily see who sponsors the website?**
- 2. Is the sponsor a Federal agency or a medical school, or is it related to one of these?**
- 3. Can you find the mission or goal of the sponsor of the website?**
- 4. Can you see who works for the agency or organization and who is the author? Is there contact information?**
- 5. Can you tell when the information was written?**
- 6. Is your privacy protected?**
- 7. Does the website make claims that seem too good to be true? Are quick, miraculous cures promised?**

Take the “too good to be true” test—information that sounds unbelievable probably is unbelievable.

A Final Note

Use your common sense and good judgment when evaluating health information

online. There are websites on nearly every conceivable health topic and no rules overseeing the quality of the information. Take a deep breath and think a bit before acting on any health information you find on the Web. Don't count on any one website. If possible, check with several sources to confirm the accuracy of your results. And remember to talk with your doctor.

For More Information

There are other resources that can help you identify good health information on the Internet. For more details, visit:

10 Questions to Help You Make Sense of Health Headlines
www.health-insight.com

Council of Better Business Bureaus
www.bbb.org

Health Internet Ethics
www.hiethics.org

Internet Health Coalition
www.ihealthcoalition.org

Medical Library Association
www.mlanet.org

National Library of Medicine MedlinePlus
www.medlineplus.gov

- In Health Topics, go to: “Evaluating Health Information”

QuackWatch
www.quackwatch.org

For more information about health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center
P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
800-222-2225 (toll-free)
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

- To order publications (in English or Spanish) online, visit www.niapublications.org.
- The National Institute on Aging website is www.nia.nih.gov.
- Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This simple-to-use website features popular health topics for older adults. It has large type and a “talking” function that reads the text out loud.

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