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Ten Health Care Mistakes To Avoid
To Save Your Life

A Special Bonus Report

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1. **Assuming that by showing up in the doctor's office, you've done your job**

Problem: research shows that what people remember most from a doctor's visit is the diagnosis -- they remember far less about what the doctor said to do about the problem. It's as if your auto mechanic says, "You need a new transmission. Your car will break down while you're driving on the highway if you don't get one." Then you get in your car without having the repairs done, and drive off thinking, "I took the car to the mechanic. I can check that off my list." That approach might not work out very well for you.

Solution: realize that knowing the name of your medical problem is just the first step. Next steps include finding out what happens if you don't get treatment or make other changes, learning what treatments are available, understanding the good points and bad points about each of those treatments, deciding which treatment is the best fit for you and your life, getting the treatment, and closing the loop to understand if the problem has been fixed or not.

2. **Assuming that the doctor can figure out what's wrong with you without much information from you**

Problem: there are 68,064 officially recognized diagnoses in the U.S. health care system. It's often a challenge for doctors to figure out which of those diagnoses applies to you. Veterinarians (animal doctors) are the only doctors happy to diagnose their patients without having their patients tell them what's going on. Mistakes in diagnosing people create big problems -- including unnecessary deaths -- roughly 13% of the time.

Solution: keep a detailed, written record of your most troubling symptoms -- what they are, dates and times when they arise, what you are doing when they appear, if anything helps, and if anything makes them worse. Imagine that you are the captain of a ship and it is your job to keep the ship's log, carefully recording information about any disruptions to smooth sailing. Give a copy to the doctor (and keep a copy yourself). This information can help clarify for your doctor what your problem is.

3. Assuming that your doctors' records about you are complete and accurate

Problem: your medical records contain notes that your doctors or their staffs have taken, and they may misinterpret something you say, remember something incorrectly, or accidentally put information in the wrong patient's chart. Have you ever had a friend or family member report on something you said or did and get some of the facts wrong? It's no different in health care. About 25% of medical records contain errors; these can lead doctors to the wrong conclusions about what's wrong with you and what treatments will help -- and what treatments are dangerous for you.

Solution: ask for a copy of your medical records from your doctors. Read the records carefully and ask the doctors -- in writing -- to correct any mistakes you find.

4. Assuming that your doctor knows all the medicines you are taking

Problem: doctors often don't know about drugs that other doctors have prescribed, and their records are often like an old shoebox full of unsorted photos: not organized well, so they often can't tell at a glance even what drugs they themselves have prescribed for you. Side effects of drugs put 8-10 million people in the hospital every year, and the risk goes up dramatically when people are taking more than one drug.

Solution: when you see doctors for the first time, take all of your medicines, vitamins, and supplements to show them. Doctors often find it easier to grasp what you are taking when they can pick up the bottles and read the labels. Also take an updated list of these products to every visit. Include the name of the drug/vitamin/supplement, the dose, how often you are supposed to take it, and how often you actually take it. Also note any problems you have with it, such as "costs too much," "too hard to swallow," "don't remember to take it 4x a day," "split the pills to save money," and so forth. Give a copy of the list to your doctor, and point out the issues you noted.

5. Assuming that doctors and nurses wash their hands before they enter the room

Problem: only about a third of hospital workers routinely wash their hands before touching patients, and doctors are no exception: fewer than half wash their hands, one study showed, if they think no one will notice. About 99,000 people die each year from infections they pick up in the hospital. Even in the doctor's office, how many people have handled the doorknob to the exam room you're in since it was last sanitized?

Solution: if you don't see the doctor or nurse wash or sanitize their hands before they approach you, politely ask them to do so.

6. Assuming that you don't have to pay attention to what's happening when you're in the hospital

Problem: hospitals are like Rube Goldberg devices -- very complicated set-ups with lots of moving parts. One key difference is that in hospitals a lot of the steps fail. According to one study, about 40% of all patients -- 15 million people a year -- are harmed by the care they receive once they get into the hospital.

Solution: either you or a friend or family member needs to advocate on your behalf when you are in the hospital. It's necessary to be your own personal version of the Better Business Bureau, verifying that what is done to you is what is supposed to be done. At a minimum, this means knowing what drugs, tests, and procedures have been ordered for you, and refusing any that you don't know that your doctor ordered.

7. Assuming that your family and friends pose no danger to you when you're in the hospital

Problem: hospitals are full of sick people and full of germs. If a family member comes to visit you and touches the elevator button, the door knob, the counter at the information desk, the soda machine, etc., they can easily pick up some nasty germs that they transfer to you by then touching the bedrails on your hospital bed, the door knob to your bathroom, your hand or face, and so forth.

Solution: ask everyone who enters your room to wash their hands before they approach you -- nurses, aides, doctors, clergy, your parents, your children, your spouse, your Aunt Sophie -- everyone.

8. Assuming that you're not at risk for blood clots because you haven't been on a long plane ride or long drive recently

Problem: most blood clots arise during or shortly after hospital care, and most people aren't screened or treated to prevent them. These blood clots kill about 200,000 people a year. That's like finding yourself staring down the barrel of a gun in a stick-up by a bank teller when you go to the bank: people are caught completely off guard because the last thing they expect is to be harmed in a place that is supposed to help them.

Solution: if you are going to be hospitalized, ask your doctor to assess whether you are at risk for blood clots. (Most people are.) If you are, ask what the plan is to prevent them.

9. Assuming that it's your fault if you don't get better, or assuming that your condition is untreatable

Problem: both doctors and patients tend to assume that once a treatment is given, the only likely outcome is that the patient gets better. In a sense, health care behaves like a professional golfer who never looks to see where the ball lands because he assumes that every time he hits it, he gets a hole in one. That optimistic thinking is misleading. A typical treatment helps only about half the people who get it.

Solution: when you are given a treatment, ask when you should expect to feel better. If you don't feel better by that date, ask the doctor if it is possible that you have a different problem than the one assumed. If the diagnosis is certain, ask what other treatments might work better for you.

10. Assuming that since the people treating you are experts, you shouldn't question their actions

Problem: doctors' offices and hospitals are busy places, often understaffed. They may have hundreds of patients to care for. You, on the other hand, have only one body and one life and it matters a great deal more to you what happens to it than it can possibly matter to anyone treating you. And, clearly, mistakes and miscommunication are common -- health care, in fact, is the second leading cause of death in America.

Solution: you have a right to understand what is happening to you and what decisions need to be made. If you aren't able to think straight because you're sick, then it's reasonable to have someone in your life that you trust ask questions on your behalf. It's a good idea to ask about the pros and cons of different treatments, and to take notes during doctors' visits so that you don't forget key points.

For more information about avoiding serious problems in dealing with health care, visit www.killercure.net and/or read *Killer Cure: Why health care is the second leading cause of death in America and how to ensure that it's not yours.*

Killer Cure is available at amazon.com and other bookstores.