

# Tips to Help Prevent Medical Errors

---

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.

---

## What Can You Do? Be Involved in Your Healthcare

The single most important way you can help prevent errors is to be an active member of your healthcare team. That means taking part in every decision about your healthcare. Research shows that patients who are more involved with their care tend to get better results. Here are some tips, based on the latest scientific evidence about what works best:

**Make sure all of your doctors know about everything you are taking. This includes prescription and over-the-counter medicines, and dietary supplements such as vitamins and herbs.** At least once a year, bring all your medicines and supplements with you to your doctor. "Brown bagging" your medicines can help you and your doctor talk about them and find out if there are any problems.

**Make sure your doctor knows about any allergies and adverse reactions you have had to medicines.**

**When your doctor writes you a prescription, make sure you can read it.**

**Ask for information about your medicines in terms you can understand — when your doctor prescribes them 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 do you do if they occur?
- Is this medicine safe to take with other medicines or dietary supplements you are taking?
- What food, drink or activities should you avoid while taking this medicine?

A study by the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Allied Health Sciences found that 88% of medicine errors involved the wrong drug or the wrong dose.

**If you have any questions about the directions on your medicine labels, ask.** Medicine labels can be hard to understand. For example, ask if "Four doses daily" means taking a dose every 6 hours around the clock, or just during regular waking hours.

**Ask your pharmacist for the best device to measure your liquid medicine. Also, ask questions if you're not sure how to use it.** Research shows that many people do not understand the right way to measure liquid medicines. For example, many use household teaspoons, which often do not hold a true teaspoon of liquid. Special devices, like marked syringes, help people measure the right dose. Ask how to use the device so you best understand.

**Ask for written information about the side effects your medicine could cause.** Read all the instructions that come with your medications, paying particular attention to side effects. Tell your doctor about any side effects you may have.

**Speak up if you have questions or concerns.** It is very important that you talk with your physician or nurse about any questions or concerns you have.

**Make sure all health professionals involved in your care have important health information about you.** Do not assume that everyone knows everything they should.

**Know that "more" is not always better.** It's a good idea to find out why a test or treatment is needed and how it can help you. You could be better off without it.

**If you have a test, don't assume that no news is good news.** Ask about the results.

**Learn about your condition and treatments by asking your doctor and nurse and by using other reliable sources.**

**For more patient safety tips, visit the  
Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality at [www.ahrq.com](http://www.ahrq.com).**