

## Home Health Equipment

Be sure to use a grounded or three-prong connector for all electrical medical equipment.

If you live in an older home, you may need to use an adapter to ensure the safe use of the equipment. Limit the use of extension cords with medical equipment.

Exercise caution when using home oxygen, and keep flames, sparks and flammable materials away from your oxygen equipment.

Never smoke while using home oxygen. Keep your oxygen equipment away from flames, sparks, flammable materials and heat sources. Keep the oxygen tubing clear and straight to ensure the proper flow of oxygen. Store liquid oxygen in a well-ventilated area, and avoid contact with this very cold substance, as it may burn the skin.

If you are confined to bed, follow these safety precautions.

Keep a bell or other means to summon help near the bed, preferably attached with a string so it cannot fall out of reach.

Use side rails to prevent falls. Never smoke in bed.



## Other Steps You Can Take

Speak up if you have questions or concerns.

You have a right to question anyone who is involved with your care.

Make sure that someone, such as your personal doctor, is in charge of your care.

This is especially important if you have many health problems or are in a hospital.

Make sure that all health professionals involved in your care have important health information about you.

Do not assume that everyone knows everything they need to.

Ask a family member or friend to be there with you and to be your advocate (someone who can help get things done and speak up for you if you can't).

Even if you think you don't need help now, you might need it later.

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 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 health care professionals and by using other reliable sources.

If you have questions about this brochure or want more information about patient safety, contact your physician, pharmacist, hospital, health plan or any member of Virginians Improving Patient Care and Safety. Additional information is also available on the Internet from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, [www.ahrq.gov](http://www.ahrq.gov) and the Institute of Safe Medication Practices, [www.ismp.org](http://www.ismp.org).

## Virginians Improving Patient Care and Safety Participants

*Bon Secours Richmond Health System*

*Carilion Health System*

*Crews & Hancock, PLC*

*HCA – The Healthcare Company – Richmond Market*

*Inova Health System*

*Kaiser-Permanente, Mid-Atlantic*

*Medical Re-Engineering*

*Medical Society of Virginia*

*MediCorp Health System*

*QualChoice of Virginia*

*Richmond Academy of Medicine*

*Sentara Healthcare*

*The Reciprocal Group*

*Trigon Blue Cross Blue Shield*

*Virginia Academy of Family Physicians*

*Virginia Association of Chain Drug Stores*

*Virginia Association of Durable Medical Equipment Companies*

*Virginia Association of Health Plans*

*Virginia Chapter, American Society for Healthcare Risk Management*

*Virginia Department of Health*

*Virginia Health Information*

*Virginia Health Quality Center*

*Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association Virginia Nurses Association*

*Virginia Organization of Nurse Executives*

*Virginia Pharmacists Association*

*Virginia Society of Health System Pharmacists*

*WVMI Inc.*

## Virginians Improving Patient Care & Safety

# Be Involved in Your Health Care

### 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 each year as the result of medical errors.*

*Medical errors happen when something that was planned as a part of medical care doesn't work out, or when the wrong plan was used in the first place. Medical errors can occur anywhere in the health care system. They can happen during even the most routine tasks, such as when a hospital patient on a salt-free diet is given a high-salt meal. Most errors result from a break down in today's complex health care system. But errors also happen when doctors and their patients have problems communicating.*

*Virginians Improving Patient Care and Safety, a coalition of hospitals, health care professionals and health plans, is working together to make the Virginia health care system safer for patients and the public. You can help too. The single most important way you can help to prevent errors is to be an active member of your 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. The tips below have been compiled from a variety of sources, including the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and the Institute for Safe Medication Practices.*

## Medicines

**Make sure that 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 of 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. It can also help your doctor keep your records up to date, which can help you get better quality care.*

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

*This can help you avoid getting a medicine that can harm you.*

**When your doctor writes you a prescription, ask that the purpose for the medication be included and make sure you can read it.**

*If you can't read your doctor's handwriting, your pharmacist might not be able to either.*

**Ask for information about your medicines in terms you can understand—both when your medicines are prescribed and when you receive them.**

*What is the medicine for? How am I supposed to take it, and for how long? What side effects are likely? What do I do if they occur? Is this safe to take with other medicines or supplements I am taking? What food, drink, or activities should I avoid while taking this medicine? What are the brand and generic names of the medications? When is the best time to take it? What should I do if I miss a dose? Does this replace anything else I was taking? Where and how do I store it?*



**When you pick up your medicine from the pharmacy, ask: Is this the medicine that my doctor prescribed?**

*A study by the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Allied Health Sciences found that 88 percent 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 to measure the right dose. Being told how to use the devices helps even more.*

**Ask for written information about the side effects your medicine could cause.**

*If you know what might happen, you will be better prepared if it does happen or if something unexpected happens instead. That way, you can report the problem right away and get help before it gets worse. A study found that written information about medicines can help patients recognize problem side effects and then give that information to their doctor, pharmacist or other health care professional.*



## Hospital Stays

**If you have a choice, choose a hospital at which many patients have the procedure or surgery you need.**

*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.*

**Take your medicines and the list of your medications with you when you go to the hospital.**

*Your doctors and nurses will need to know what you're taking, then send your medicines home with your family. While you're in the hospital, any medications you need will be provided by the hospital.*

**If your doctor prescribes medications for you to take while in the hospital, tell your doctor you want to know the names of each medication and the reasons you are taking them**

**Before you take any medicine in the hospital, look at it. If it doesn't look like what you usually take, ask why. It might be a generic drug, or it might be the wrong drug.**

*Ask the same questions you would ask if you were in the pharmacy.*

**Do not let anyone give you medications without checking your hospital ID bracelet every time.**

*This helps prevent you from getting someone else's medications.*

**Before any test or procedure, ask if it will require any dyes or medicines. Remind your nurse and doctor if you have allergies.**

**If you are in a hospital, consider asking all health care workers who have direct contact with you whether they have washed their hands.**

*Handwashing 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 checked whether health care workers washed their hands, the workers washed their hands more often and used more soap.*

**When you are being discharged from the hospital, ask your doctor or nurse to explain the treatment plan you will use at home.**

*This includes learning about your medicines and finding out when you can get back to your 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. When you're ready to go home, have the doctor or nurse write the purpose for the medication on the prescription. Many drug names look alike when written poorly; knowing the purpose helps you and the pharmacist double-check the prescription.*

## Surgery

**If you are having surgery, make sure that you and the health care professionals treating you all agree and are clear on exactly what will be done.**

*Doing surgery at the wrong site (for example, operating on the left knee instead of the right) is rare. But even once is too often. The good news is that wrong-site surgery is 100 percent preventable. The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons urges its members to sign their initials directly on the site to be operated on before the surgery.*

