

“Ten Things Patients Should Know” Series

TEN WAYS TO BE PREPARED AT THE EMERGENCY ROOM

1. Keep an updated **Personal Health Record** containing medications and dosages, allergies, major illnesses, hospitalizations and surgeries. Include names, contact information for all current providers, and bring the record with you.
2. Decide in advance who will act as your **advocate** at the hospital. Confirm that the person is comfortable with the role and have a way to contact him/her at all times. Complete Medical Power of Attorney (or healthcare proxy) forms and give your advocate(s) a copy.
3. Be able to describe the patient's **symptoms**, including how long they have been present, what makes the symptoms better or worse and if the patient has had these symptoms before. If the patient is in pain, ask if he or she has taken any type of medication for the discomfort and bring the bottle with you.
4. Realize that **infection control** is vital even during an emergency. Do your surroundings look clean? If not, ask that the surfaces be wiped with disinfectant. Do not be shy about asking staff to wash their hands as they enter the room and before they touch the patient.
5. Understand the concept of **differential diagnosis** - a list of the illnesses that might be causing the patient's symptoms, with the most likely causes at the top. Ask what conditions are included in the differential diagnosis and share any information you can provide about the patient's history.
6. Know that you could be seen by a resident or other clinician who is in training. It is always appropriate to ask staff for their name, title and experience level. Providers can consult with **attending physicians or on-call specialists** if someone with more expertise is needed.
7. Use a notebook or a **patient journal** to track the patient's providers, vital signs, medications and tests.
8. **Know why every medication or test is being ordered** and what information it may provide. Ask how this information may affect the treatment plan. Inquire who is interpreting test results after hours and ask if x-rays, scans or pathology specimens will be verified by a second reading to improve accuracy.
9. Ask if the patient is being **admitted on observation status**. Many insurance plans will not cover hospitalization for observation and the patient is billed for the cost. Be sure every specialist you see, or any provider who is interpreting your test results, is part of your insurance plan to avoid unexpected charges. Note specialists' names in a patient journal.
10. Be certain you receive **written discharge instructions** that you understand. Know when and where to receive follow up care and what to do, and whom to call, if complications occur.