

Common Medical Errors



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Medical errors can occur at the doctor's office, the pharmacy, the hospital, outpatient clinics, laboratories, long-term care facilities, and even at home. Medication errors affect at least 1.5 million people a year and incur about 3.5 billion in associated hospital costs alone. Other common medical errors involve diagnostic and radiological tests being misinterpreted. Medical errors can result in misdiagnosis, incorrect medication or dosage, wrong site or unnecessary surgery, infections, serious complications, and even death.

Medication errors and prevention

Studies indicate that 400,000 preventable drug-related injuries occur every year at hospitals. An additional 800,000 occur in long-term care facilities, and about 530,000 alone affect Medicare recipients in outpatient clinics.

Medication errors include mistakes involving prescription drugs, over-the-counter (OTC) drugs, and dietary supplements. Errors occur commonly — from prescription and administration of a drug — to monitoring patient response to a medication. Errors can even happen at home, when patients take an incorrect medication, combination of medications or dosage.

According to the Institute of Medicine, hospitals, outpatient clinics, pharmacies, labs, and long-term care facilities must change specific procedures to enable improvements in patient safety and a decrease in medical errors. But patients can also take proactive steps to help protect themselves.

- Maintain an up-to-date list of all medications you use, including OTC drugs and dietary supplements and share this with all of your healthcare providers. This list should also include the reasons you are taking each product and any known drug or food allergies.
- Don't combine pain relievers, prescriptions or multi-symptom medicines with others that have the same active pain/symptom relief ingredient. This may result in too high a dosage and can lead to serious health problems.
- Read the label thoroughly, follow all directions and warnings, and take the medication **exactly** as directed.
- Do not combine prescription medications and OTC drugs without consulting your doctor first.

- At the hospital, do not let anyone ever give you medications without them checking your identification bracelet. This can help prevent you from getting someone else's medications.
- Before any test or procedure, ask if it will require any dyes or medications, to prevent potentially dangerous allergic reactions.

Preventing surgery-related errors

While most of the following are standard or mandated practices, it is important that as a surgical patient, you are aware of the following precautionary measures.

- Make sure there is agreement between you and your healthcare team about the exact type of procedure you will be undergoing.
- Thoroughly read all the medical forms, including the consent form, and make sure that you understand them and that they are accurate before you sign them.
- Have a responsible family member or friend accompany you to preoperative surgery visits and on the day of your surgery.
- Verify the information on your patient identification bracelet. If anything is incorrect, ask that it be corrected.
- Marking the part of the body undergoing surgery is mandated by hospital protocol. In the unlikely circumstance that this precautionary step is not taken, ask to have the site marked with an indelible marker.
- Make sure somebody asks you to state your full name, Social Security number or date of birth, and the site for your procedure, prior to entering the operating room.