

Patient Safety Tips

Produced by the Patient Safety Authority



Help Your Doctor Diagnose You Correctly

You as the patient play a very important role in helping your doctor determine what is wrong with you if you are not feeling well. Often, if you do not tell the doctor everything you know, he or she may not diagnose you correctly. The Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority recently published information regarding missed or delayed diagnosis. Errors related to missed or delayed diagnosis are often the cause of patient injury. In one study, 53 autopsies were examined between 1966 and 2002. The study showed an error rate of four to 50 percent. Furthermore, the study showed in four percent of these cases death could have been avoided if the patient had been diagnosed and treated correctly. Help your doctor by educating yourself on how you can become a better patient.

(Additional Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality)

Diagnostic Error: Diagnostic error is a diagnosis that is missed, incorrect, or delayed, as detected by a definitive test or finding done later. Not all misdiagnosis results in harm and harm may be due to either disease or intervention.

How You Can Become A Better Patient

- Tell your doctor the complete story, because even symptoms that may seem minor could be important.
- Establish a timeline. Knowing the chronological order of symptoms and complaints could be very important for your doctor.
- Keep records of all test results, discharge summaries, and whatever data might be needed by the next doctor who does not have access to information from the last doctor or healthcare organization.
- Do not minimize complaints. If you do, your doctor may follow your lead and do the same.
- Bring important information like medications, your medical history, and a list of your symptoms in writing.
- Bring a companion to help you hear and understand everything your doctor says to you.
- Understand that your doctor diagnoses your condition by considering the history of your medical problem, the results of a physical examination, and the findings of medical tests. With each step, the doctor looks for patterns that fit an illness. Help your doctor see patterns by disclosing all relevant information in a concise manner. Do not be afraid to ask if your doctor needs more information.
- Find a doctor who knows how to listen.
- If you think your doctor has overlooked something, tell him.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions like the following: What else could it be? Is there anything that does not fit? Could it be that I have more than one problem?
- Feel free to offer your own suggestions.
- Ask about when you can expect test results, and call your physician if you do not hear about the results. Do not think that “no news is good news.”

To learn more about diagnostic error and review possible cases of diagnostic error in Pennsylvania, go to the 2010 September *Pennsylvania Patient Safety Advisory* article “Diagnostic Error in Acute Care” at the Authority’s Website, www.patientsafetyauthority.org.