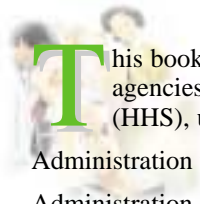


Improving Health Care Quality

A Guide for Patients and Families





This booklet was produced in a cooperative effort by the agencies of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), under the leadership of Secretary Donna E. Shalala:

Administration for Children and Families

Administration on Aging

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Food and Drug Administration

Health Care Financing Administration

Health Resources and Services Administration

Indian Health Service

National Institutes of Health

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

To learn more about the wealth of evidence-based information these agencies provide, visit the HHS Web site at www.hhs.gov.

For more information about quality health care, visit the HHS gateway to reliable health information at www.healthfinder.gov.

For partnerships to produce this or a more detailed version, contact the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) at 800-358-9295 or write to AHRQ Clearinghouse, P.O. Box 8547, Silver Spring, MD 20907.

A Guide to Better Health Care Quality

This booklet presents information and a list of resources to help you get better quality health care. You can read the booklet all the way through or turn to the sections that interest you the most.

- To learn more about what affects health care quality and how you can become involved, read pages 2 to 5.
- To learn about measuring health care quality and where to find measurement tools, read pages 6 to 11.
- For tips to help you make more informed health care decisions, read pages 11 to 14.
- For information on how you can find out about clinical trials, turn to page 14.
- For a list of resources, including Internet sites and phone numbers, see pages 15 to 18.



Every day, millions of Americans receive high-quality health care. They get the right care, at the right time, and in the right way. And, they get the best possible results.

But every once in a while, something goes wrong. People receive health care services they don't need. Or they can't get care when they need it. Sometimes, people are affected by medical errors that could have been prevented. A medical error is a mistake that happens when a person gets health care services.

The fact is, health care quality varies. There are many reasons for this because quality depends on many things, including where you live, who you are, and how much is known about treating your condition.

*The good news is,
things are getting better
—and you can help!*




Health care providers and groups are working hard to improve health care quality. You can help, too. You can take steps to improve the quality of your own health care. Research has shown that if you are more involved in your health care, you can get better results and feel more satisfied. Here's what you can do:

- Work together with your doctor, nurse, and other health care providers to make decisions about your care.
- Tell your doctor about all of the medicines you take. Be sure to include prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, and herbal supplements. Don't forget to tell the doctor about any allergies or side effects you have had in the past from medicines. This is very important when your doctor gives you a new prescription.

- When you pick up your prescription from the drug store, read the label right away. Make sure it is what the doctor ordered for you.
- If you have several health problems or are in a hospital, many people may be involved in your care. Make sure that someone (such as your personal doctor) is in charge of your care. Speak often with that person. Ask a family member or friend to be part of your health care team if you are very sick or need major surgery.
- Ask questions, and keep asking them until you understand the answers. You have a right to speak with anyone who is involved with your care.
- Don't assume that "no news is good news" when you have an x-ray or laboratory test. Ask your doctor or nurse about when and how you will receive the results. Will it be in person, by mail, or by phone? If you don't receive the results when you expect them, contact your doctor and ask for them.

- If you are having surgery, make sure that you, your doctor, and your surgeon all agree on what will be done. Find out what you can do before and after surgery to speed your recovery.
- Ask your doctor what the scientific evidence has to say about your condition and treatment options. Also, if you have access to a computer, go to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality’s Web site at www.ahrq.gov and click on “Quality Assessment.” There you will find fact sheets and other information on health care quality.
- Know that “more is not always better.” Be sure to find out why you need a test or treatment and how it can help you. You could be better off without it.
- When making health care choices, find and use information about quality measures. This booklet tells you how.

How is quality measured?



More and more public and private groups are developing and using quality measures. Measures are used to check up on and improve the quality of health plans, doctors, hospitals, and other providers of health care. Consumer ratings and performance measures are the two main types of quality measures.


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- **Consumer ratings** tell you what people like you think about their health care. Consumer ratings of health plans may come from a survey called CAHPS®. The survey was developed by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. The questions in CAHPS® ask people about the quality of care in their own health plans. Their answers can help you decide whether you want to join one of those plans. To find out more about CAHPS®, go to the AHRQ web site at www.ahrq.gov and click on “CAHPS” under the heading “Quality Assessment.”

- **Clinical performance measures** (also sometimes called “technical quality” measures) look at how well a health plan or hospital prevents and treats illnesses. HEDIS - the Health Plan Employer Data and Information Set - is a set of performance measures that rates the quality of HMOs and other managed care plans. One example of a HEDIS measure is whether health care providers in the plan advise smokers to quit.

Both CAHPS® and HEDIS are based on research about the kinds of health care that lead to better results for patients.

Where are these measures?

oday, you can find a great deal of information about health care quality. And much more is on the way. Here is a brief look at what is available now and where you can find it:

- **Quality reports.** Quality reports include consumer ratings, clinical performance measures, or both. These

reports go by different names, including report cards and performance reports. Quality reports can help you select the right treatment, based on the things that are most important to you. You may be able to get quality reports from:

- **Your employer.** Ask your personnel office for information on the plan or plans that are offered.
- **Health plans.** Ask the plan's customer service office.
- **Other health care providers,** such as hospitals, nursing homes, or community health clinics.

If you need help, check with your local library or your local or State department of health. You can find your State department of health listed in the blue pages of your phone book.

Also, look for these quality reports, which are based on consumer ratings from CAHPS®:

- For quality reports about Medicare managed care plans, call 1-800-MEDICARE, or look for Medicare Compare at www.medicare.gov (Medicare Compare is also based on HEDIS).
- For quality reports about Federal employee health plans, visit the Office of Personnel Management Web site at www.opm.gov/hr/insure/index.html.

Another type of quality measurement is accreditation. Accreditation is a “seal of approval” given by a private, independent group. Health care organizations must meet national standards - including clinical performance measures - in order to be accredited. Some organizations, such as group practices, do not have such a program available. Accreditation is done by a number of groups. Some of them are:

- The National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA). NCQA evaluates and accredits managed care plans. Call 888-275-7585 to find out if a health plan is

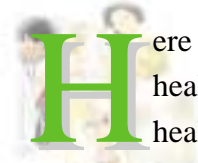
accredited. Or call 800-839-6487 to ask for accreditation information. NCQA's Web address is www.ncqa.org.

■ Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations. JCAHO evaluates and accredits hospitals, health care networks, and managed care organizations. JCAHO also accredits health care organizations that provide home care, long-term care, behavioral health care, and laboratory and ambulatory care services. For information, visit Quality Check - www.jcaho.org/qualitycheck/ - on JCAHO's Web site, or call 630-792-5000.

■ American Accreditation HealthCare Commission/URAC. This group develops accreditation standards and programs for managed care. Call 202-216-9010 for information on accredited organizations. Or visit URAC's Web site at www.urac.org/accredited.htm.

- Community Health Accreditation Program. CHAP evaluates and accredits home health care organizations. To find out more, call CHAP at 800-669-9656, ext. 242. Or visit CHAP's Web site at www.chapinc.org/chap-consumer.htm.

Choosing quality health care



Here are some tips for including quality in your health care decisions. Such decisions involve health plans, doctors, treatments, hospitals, and long-term care:

Look for a health plan that:

- Has been given high ratings by its members on the things that are important to you.
- Does a good job of helping people stay well and get better.
- Has the doctors and hospitals you want or need.
- Provides the benefits (covered services) you need.
- Provides services where and when you need them.

Look for a doctor who:

- Has received high ratings for quality of care.
- Has the training and experience to meet your needs.
- Takes steps to prevent illness - for example, will talk to you about getting the screening tests that are right for you.
- Can get you admitted to or treat you at the hospital of your choice.
- Is part of your health plan, unless you are willing to pay extra.
- Will work with you to make decisions about your health care.

When choosing a treatment, make sure you understand:

- Your diagnosis.
- How soon you need to be treated.

- Your treatment choices.
- Whether the treatments are based on the latest scientific evidence.
- The benefits and risks of each treatment.
- The costs of each treatment.
- How much experience your doctor has in treating your condition.

Look for a hospital that:

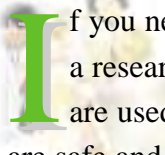
- Is accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations.
- Is rated highly by the State and by consumer groups or other organizations.
- Is one where your doctor can treat you.
- Is covered by your health plan.

- Has a lot of experience and success with your condition.
- Monitors quality of care and works to improve quality.

Look for a long-term-care facility that:

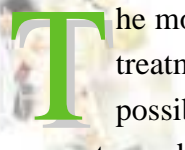
- Has been found by State agencies and other groups to provide quality care.
- Provides a level of care, including staff and services, that will meet your needs.

Clinical Trials

 If you need treatment, you may be able to take part in a research study called a clinical trial. Clinical trials are used to find out whether new drugs or treatments are safe and effective. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has a Web site with information about many of the clinical trials that are in progress. Visit www.nih.gov/health/trials to learn if a clinical trial is

underway for your condition and whether you might be able to take part in it.

For more information



The more you know about your condition and its treatment, the more likely you are to get the best possible care and results. If you have access to a computer and the Internet you can find information on every health topic.

If you don't have a computer, check with your local library. Most libraries have computers you can use and staff that can help you learn to search the Internet.

Here are a few places to go for more information and other kinds of help.

- A good place to start is www.healthfinder.gov where you can tap into reliable consumer health information from the Federal Government and its many partners. Healthfinder can link you to:

- Hundreds of Web sites with consumer health information.
- Online publication catalogs and ordering information.
- Online brochures and other documents.
- Databases and search engines to help you find even more information.

■ For Medicare information, check out <http://medicare.gov> where you can view, download, and order Medicare and other publications on health.

■ Online information about doctors is available in some States. Go to www.docboard.org to see if your State is included.

■ Visit the American Medical Association's Web site at www.ama-assn.org or call the AMA at 1-800-665-2882.

- **Support groups.** Self-help groups offer support to people with disabilities, cancer, and many other kinds of health problems. For information on national support groups and groups near you, go to www.healthfinder.gov and type “self-help” in the search box. Then click on “go.” This will take you to the American Self-Help Clearinghouse.
- **Board certification.** Call the American Board of Medical Specialties at 1-800-776-2378 to find out if a doctor is board certified.
- **Accreditation.** Call the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (1-630-792-5800) or go to their Web site at www.jcaho.org to find out if a hospital, nursing home, or outpatient surgery facility is accredited. Other accrediting organizations include: the Accreditation Association for Ambulatory Healthcare, 1-847-853-6060, www.aaahc.org for urgent or emergency care centers; the Community Health Accreditation Program 1-800-669-9656,

www.chapinc.org for home health care agencies; the National Committee for Quality Assurance, 1-888-275-7585, www.ncqa.org for managed care health plans; the American Accreditation HealthCare Commission/URAC, 1-202-216-9010, www.urac.org also for managed care; and many others.

- **Resources for the Elderly.** Contact the Eldercare Locator (1-800-677-1116, weekdays, 9 am to 8 pm EST). This service can refer you to your Area Agency on Aging where you can get information on meals, home care, adult day care, long-term care, transportation, legal services, and more.
- **Information on Health Plans.** Check your local phone book for your State's department of health or the insurance commissioner's office. Contact the National Association of Insurance Commissioners online at www.naic.org or call 1-816-842-3600.

For more copies of this booklet:

Call the AHRQ Publications Clearinghouse at 1-800-358-9295 (410-381-3150 from outside the United States only) and ask for AHRQ Publication No. 01-0004.

To find out more about the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, go to www.ahrq.gov to visit our Web site.







Dear reader: We have listed a number of organizations, Web sites, and phone numbers in this booklet to help you find out more about health care quality. This information is provided only as a service to readers and does not imply endorsement or promotion by the Government of these organizations, any products or services they offer, or any groups they may link with through their Web sites.



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