



A Guide for People With Medicare

Choosing a Hospital



Developed jointly by the
Health Care Financing Administration
and the
Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality



HEALTH CARE FINANCING ADMINISTRATION
The Federal Medicare Agency

This booklet, *Choosing a Hospital*, is one of a new series of booklets for people who are with Medicare. Other titles include *Choosing Treatments* and *Choosing a Doctor*. Each booklet can help you to make health care choices.

To get copies of this booklet in print or audiotape, call 1-800-633-4227, TTY/TDD: 1-877-486-2048 for hearing and speech impaired people.

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This Guide has a lot of tips and questions to help you make the choices that are right for you. But it is not necessary, or even possible, for every person to do everything this Guide suggests. Do as much or as little as you feel comfortable with.

A note about the symbols used in this booklet:

 means a mailing address.

 means a telephone number.

 means a number for TTY or TDD, text telephones for people with hearing and speech impairments.

 means a computer Web site address.

If you do not have a computer, your local library or senior center may be able to help you find information on their computers.

How This Booklet Can Help You

At some time now or in the future, you or a loved one may need to get hospital care. Research shows that some hospitals take care of patients better than others. For example, patients do better when a hospital does the same procedure often.

This booklet can help you choose a hospital that will give you good quality care. Giving good quality health care means doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, for the right person—and getting the best possible results.

The basics you need to know are in the first section. The second section, which starts on page 11, has more details for those who want them.

A Few Words About Medicare

If you have Medicare, you can get your health care in more than one way. The way you get your Medicare health care may affect your choice of hospitals. That is why it is important to know how you get your Medicare health care.

- Most people are in the **Original Medicare Plan**. If you are, you may go to any doctor or hospital that accepts Medicare. You pay your share, and Medicare pays its share. Some things are not covered, like prescription drugs.

You are in the Original Medicare Plan if you use your red, white, and blue Medicare Card when you get your health care.

- Some people are in a **Medicare managed care plan**, like an HMO. It is a group of doctors, hospitals, and other health care providers who have agreed to give health care to people with Medicare who join the plan. In exchange, the plan gets a fixed amount of money from Medicare every month.

In most Medicare managed care plans, you must go to doctors and hospitals that belong to your plan. Plans must cover everything the Original Medicare Plan covers. Some plans cover extras, like prescription drugs.

- A **Private Fee-for-Service plan** is a new health care choice that is now available in some areas. This is a Medicare health plan offered by a private insurance company. It is not the same as the Original Medicare Plan, which is offered by the Federal Government.

In a Private Fee-for-Service plan, the insurance company agrees to give health care coverage to people with Medicare who join this plan on a pay-per-visit basis. In exchange, Medicare pays the insurance company a set amount of money every month. The insurance company, not the Medicare program, decides how much it pays, and how much you pay, for the services you get.

In a Private Fee-for-Service plan, you can go to any doctor or hospital that accepts the plan's payment. Plans must cover everything the Original Medicare Plan covers. Some plans cover extras, like coverage for additional days in the hospital.

To learn more about Medicare, please call the Medicare Choices Helpline and ask for a free copy of the handbook *Medicare & You*. If you have access to the Internet, you can get help with your questions about Medicare at the Medicare Internet site.

 1-800-633-4227 (1-800-MEDICARE)

 1-877-486-2048 (toll-free)

 <http://www.medicare.gov>

Section 1

The Basics



Words You Should Know

Health care provider. A person who is trained and licensed to give health care. Also, a place that is licensed to give health care. Doctors, nurses, and hospitals are examples of health care providers.

Patient advocate. A hospital employee whose job is to speak on a patient's behalf and help patients get any information or services they need.

Procedure. Something done to fix a health problem or learn more about it. For example, surgery, tests, and putting in an IV (intravenous line) are procedures.

Treatment. Something done to help with a health problem. For example, medicine and surgery are treatments.

Why Choose a Hospital?

In a medical emergency—when every second counts—you may not be able to choose the hospital you go to. But often going into the hospital is not an emergency. You have time to think about it and to choose the hospital you think will give you the best care.

Your choice of a hospital may depend on your doctor. It may also depend on how you get your Medicare health care.



If you are in the Original Medicare Plan: You may use any hospital that accepts Medicare patients.

If you are in a Medicare managed care plan: In most cases, you must use hospitals that belong to your plan. Some managed care plans let you pay extra to use a hospital not on the plan's list. Look at your plan's membership materials. Call your plan to find out if you can do this and how much it would cost.

Before you choose to join a Medicare managed care plan, you may want to think about which hospitals you would like to use. Then you may be able to choose a plan that has your choice of hospitals.

If you are in a Private Fee-for-Service plan: You may use any hospital that accepts the plan's payment terms.

Questions To Ask When Choosing a Hospital

Here are some questions that everyone with Medicare may want to ask when choosing a hospital:

- **Is this a hospital where my doctor can treat patients?**
- **Do staff at this hospital treat a lot of people with my health problem?**
- **How well do staff at this hospital treat people with my health problem?**
-

Read on for more about each of these questions.

Is this a hospital where my doctor can treat patients?

The first thing to find out is if your doctor can treat you while you are in this hospital. (Doctors usually have “privileges” in only a few hospitals.) If not, you may want to choose a hospital where your doctor can treat you. Or you may choose to go to this hospital, knowing that you will need to be under another doctor’s care while you are there.

Is being cared for by your own doctor very important to you? If so, you will want to choose a hospital where your doctor can treat patients.

• Do staff at this hospital treat a lot of people with my health problem?

Your choice of hospital may depend on the kind of health problem you have. Sometimes a hospital is known for treating a certain kind of problem, like heart disease. If you need that kind of treatment, you may want to choose that hospital. If you have a rare or serious health problem, you may want to go to a hospital that treats a lot of people who have that problem. It may be helpful to talk with your doctor about which hospital you should choose.

Research shows that hospital staff have better success when they do a procedure often. You may want to ask your doctor:

- How often is this procedure done at this hospital?
- How often does the doctor do this procedure?
- How well do patients do after they have the procedure?



What is done to make sure patients get the best quality care?

Many hospitals are trying to make their quality of care better. One way to do this is to keep track of how well patients do. For example, if a lot of patients get infections while they are in the hospital, the hospital tries to find out what might be causing the problem. Then it makes changes and tries to do better so that fewer patients get infections.

You may want to ask your doctor if he or she knows how this hospital tries to improve its quality of care.

Your Rights as a Medicare Patient in the Hospital

No matter which hospital you choose, as a Medicare patient you have certain rights while you are in the hospital.

You have the right to get all the care you need while you are in the hospital and after you leave. If you feel you are being asked to leave the hospital before you are ready to go, you have a right to ask for a review of that decision. This is explained in “An Important Message from Medicare.” The hospital should give you a copy of this message. If you do not get a copy, please ask your nurse or patient advocate to get you one.

Things To Remember

- **If being cared for by your own doctor is important to you, you will want to choose a hospital where your doctor can treat patients.**
- **In most Medicare managed care plans, you must use hospitals that belong to your plan. Some plans let you pay extra to use hospitals not on the plan's list.**
- **In a Private Fee-for-Service plan, you may use any hospital that accepts the plan's payment terms.**
- **Research shows that patients do better when a hospital does the same procedure often.**
- **No matter which hospital you choose, as a Medicare patient you have certain rights while you are in the hospital.**

Section 2

If You Want To Know More



This section has more detailed information on choosing a hospital.

More Words You Should Know

Accredited (accreditation). A “seal of approval.” Being accredited means that a facility has met certain quality standards. These standards are set by private, nationally recognized groups that check on the quality of care at health care facilities.

Certified (certification). This means a hospital has passed a survey done by a State government agency. Being certified is not the same as being accredited. Medicare only covers care in hospitals that are certified or accredited.

Here are more questions you may want to ask when choosing a hospital:

•Does the hospital meet national quality standards?

•How does the hospital compare with others in my area?

•How else can I find out about a hospital’s quality of care?

Read on to learn where you can find answers to these questions.

Does the hospital meet national quality standards?

Both the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) and the American Osteopathic Association (AOA) check on the quality of care at hospitals. For example, JCAHO looks at how well a hospital treats patients and how good a hospital's staff and equipment are. A hospital is accredited if it meets certain quality standards. These checks are done at least every 3 years. Most hospitals take part in these accreditations.

JCAHO writes a "performance report" on each hospital it checks. This report lists:

- The hospital's level of accreditation. There are six. The lowest is "Not Accredited." The best is "Accredited With Commendation."
- Date the hospital was checked.
- Summary of key findings.
- Results of any followup action.
- Areas that need to improve.
- How the hospital compares with others in the country.

You can order these reports free of charge. You can also call or write to JCAHO to find out a hospital's level of accreditation.

✉ Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations
1 Renaissance Blvd.
Oakbrook Terrace, IL 60181-4294

☎ 1-630-792-5800

💻 <http://www.jcaho.org>

The AOA also writes a performance report on each hospital it checks. This report gives the hospital's level of accreditation. The lowest is "Denial of Accreditation." The best is "Accreditation with Resurvey Within Three Years." You can call or write to AOA to find out a hospital's level of accreditation.

✉ American Osteopathic Association
Healthcare Facility Accreditation Program
142 E. Ontario Street
Chicago, IL 60611

☎ 1-312-202-8258

💻 <http://www.aoa-net.org>

To participate in the Medicare program, hospitals must either be accredited by JCAHO or AOA, or be certified by a State survey agency.

• **How does the hospital compare with others in my area?**

Here are some ways to compare the quality of care at hospitals:

- Some States and consumer groups prepare hospital "report cards." Looking at these report cards is a way to learn about hospital quality. A recent study found that these reports help consumers make informed choices. They also help hospitals improve their quality of care.

Some States publish "outcomes studies" that show how well patients did after having certain procedures at different hospitals in the State. These studies can help you see which hospitals and surgeons have had the most success with a procedure.

Here are some examples of States that publish reports on the quality of care at hospitals. If your State is not listed, call your local library and ask whether your State publishes any reports on the quality of care at hospitals.

- **California.** The California Hospital Outcomes Project has published reports on how well patients with certain health problems did at different hospitals in California. To learn more:

✉ Healthcare Information Resource Center
818 K Street, Room 500
Sacramento, CA 95814

☎ 1-916-322-2814

💻 <http://www.oshpd.cahwnet.gov/hpp/chop.htm>

- **New York.** The New York State Department of Health publishes reports that compare outcomes for patients who have heart bypass surgery. These reports can tell you how well patients did when they were treated at certain hospitals or by certain surgeons. To learn more:

✉ New York State Department of Health
Public Affairs Group
Corning Tower
Empire State Plaza
Albany, NY 12237

☎ 1-518-474-7354

💻 <http://www.health.state.ny.us> (Select “Info for Consumers.” Then select “Heart Disease.”)

- **Pennsylvania.** The Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council has published more than 80 public reports about health care in Pennsylvania. These reports can be found in most public libraries in the State. To learn more:

✉ Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council
225 Market Street, Suite 400
Harrisburg, PA 17101

☎ 1-717-232-6787

💻 <http://www.phc4.org>

- **Rhode Island.** The Rhode Island Department of Health has published reports about the quality of care at hospitals in Rhode Island. To learn more:

✉ Rhode Island Department of Health
3 Capitol Hill
Providence, RI 02908

☎ 1-401-222-2231

☎ 1-800-745-5555

💻 <http://www.health.state.ri.us/quality/qualitycare.pdf>

- Nonprofit groups in some areas publish guides to health care choices. An example is the Pacific Business Group on Health, which maintains the HealthScope Internet site. HealthScope provides access to report cards that show how well California hospitals do at delivering babies, treating heart attacks, and performing heart bypass and other kinds of surgery. The site also offers general information about choosing hospitals, health plans, and medical groups.

 <http://www.healthscope.org>

- Ask if the hospital has a special team of health care providers that works with people who have your health problem.
- Every hospital should have an office in charge of quality. Ask how the hospital makes sure it is giving high-quality care.
- Ask your doctor what he or she thinks about a hospital's quality of care.

Getting More Information

You need a computer to use some of these resources. If you do not have a computer, your local library or senior center may be able to help you find the information on their computers.

All Hospitals Are Not Created Equal

This Internet site suggests questions that may help you choose the hospital that best suits your needs. Part of a series published by *Health Pages*, an on-line health magazine.

 <http://www.thehealthpages.com/articles/ar-hosps.html>

American Hospital Association Patient's Bill of Rights

This hospital group has published a voluntary list of patients' rights in a hospital. These may not be the same as the rights you have as a Medicare patient. Available from the American Hospital Association. Free.

✉ American Hospital Association
1 North Franklin Street
Chicago, IL 60606

☎ 1-312-422-3000

💻 <http://www.aha.org> (Select "About the AHA." Then select "Patient Bill of Rights.")

Also available from Fax on Demand:

☎ 1-312-422-2020 (document number 471124)

Choosing a Hospital and Hospital Quality Checklist

This Internet site maintained by the Pacific Business Group on Health offers tips on how to choose a hospital and how to check on a hospital's quality of care.

💻 http://www.healthscope.org/hcd/choose_hosp.asp

💻 <http://www.healthscope.org/hospital/quality.asp>

Healthfinder

This Internet site offers reliable consumer information from the Federal Government and its many partners. It is run by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It has links to other Internet sites with consumer health information, publication catalogs, brochures, and

databases and search engines that help you find information on the Internet.



<http://www.healthfinder.gov>

Hospital Select

This Internet site has basic information on all U.S. hospitals. The site also has links to the American Medical Association Internet site, which lists doctors and specialists.



<http://www.hospitalselect.com>

Medicare Information

Many brochures can be ordered from the Medicare Choices Helpline. These brochures explain Medicare benefits, coverage, rights, health plan choices, and more. They can also be found on the Medicare Internet site. Free.



1-800-633-4227



1-877-486-2048 (toll-free)



<http://www.medicare.gov> (Select “Publications.”)

The Medicare Internet site also provides access to several interactive databases, including “Medicare Health Plan Compare,” which offers detailed information on Medicare managed care plans and Private Fee-for-Service plans, and “Nursing Home Compare,” which offers detailed information on nursing homes.



<http://www.medicare.gov>
(Select “Medicare Health Plan Compare” for plans and
“Nursing Home Compare” for nursing homes.)

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