

What to Expect as a Patient in the Hospital

You play a key role in your own health care. The more you understand about your own healthcare, the better you will be able to receive the care you want and deserve. At some point in your life, you or a loved one may end up spending some time in a hospital. This summary is meant to help you understand a little about what it might be like in the hospital.

What is a hospital?

A hospital is a place that is built, staffed, and equipped for the diagnosis of disease and the treatment of sick and injured people.

How do hospitals work?

A hospital is like a small city. People live and work there. They have to eat, things have to be cleaned and maintained, and trash has to be removed.

The Hospital Hierarchical Structure

Just like a city, a hospital is run by a group of people who oversee other groups of people.

- The board of directors is responsible for the organization's direction, its short- and long-term goals, its strategy and its mission statement and vision.
- Executive management consists of the managers who oversee the hospital. Executive management ensures that the day-to-day operations of the hospital are executed in accordance with the goals and mission statement.
- Department administrators report directly to executive management. They typically oversee a specific department or ward of the hospital.
- Patient care managers are the highest-ranking clinical professionals in their departments. The patient care manager is usually the supervising physician or nurse manager on duty. In addition to overseeing and developing a team of clinicians, the patient care manager is the primary resource for handling escalated issues or problems that may arise in their department.
- Clinical health care providers are front-line medical workers who consist of nurses, nurse practitioners and other clinicians. They collect patient information, conduct initial patient assessments and coordinate care when patients are admitted to the hospital.

- Other professionals like physical therapists, physician assistants, imaging specialists, technicians, administrative clerks, dietary aides, as well as food service, custodians, maintenance staff, and security round out those who work in a hospital.

Different Sections of the Hospital

Hospitals are separated into units based on the general and specialized needs of the patients. These units vary from hospital to hospital. In addition to the units listed below, hospitals will also have labs for testing blood and other bodily fluids, testing facilities, places to eat, and places to wait.

CCU - The coronary/cardiac care unit is a specialized intensive care unit for cardiac issues.

ER - The emergency room, also referred to as the ED - emergency department, is where patients are first seen after a sudden and serious illness or injury.

ICU - The intensive care unit is where patients are sent if they require close monitoring. The ICU is also referred to as a critical care unit.

MICU - The medical intensive care unit is for patients who are critically ill with a medical problem such as a chronic disease or for those who are acutely ill.

NICU - The NICU may refer to either the neurological intensive care unit or the neonatal intensive care unit. In some facilities, the neurological ICU is referred to as NCC, for neurological critical care. The neurological ICU is where you're taken if you have a serious brain-related illness. The neonatal ICU is where newborns are taken for intensive care.

Oncology - The oncology unit is where patients receive therapies intended to improve or cure cancer.

PICU - The pediatric intensive care unit (PICU) where children receive critical care.

The Floor - A floor unit in a hospital is where you're cared for when you don't require especially close monitoring.

Patient's Rights When Admitted to the Hospital

(Quoted from the AMA Code of Medical Ethics, Patient rights)

"Physicians can best contribute to a mutually respectful alliance with patients by serving as their patients' advocates and by respecting patients' rights. These include the right:

1. To courtesy, respect, dignity, and timely, responsive attention to his or her needs.
2. To receive information from their physicians and to have opportunity to discuss the benefits, risks, and costs of appropriate treatment alternatives, including the risks, benefits and costs of forgoing treatment. Patients should be able to expect that their physicians will provide guidance about what they consider the optimal course of action for the patient based on the physician's objective professional judgment.
3. To ask questions about their health status or recommended treatment when they do not fully understand what has been described and to have their questions answered.
4. To make decisions about the care the physician recommends and to have those decisions respected. A patient who has decision-making capacity may accept or refuse any recommended medical intervention.
5. To have the physician and other staff respect the patient's privacy and confidentiality.
6. To obtain copies or summaries of their medical records.
7. To obtain a second opinion.
8. To be advised of any conflicts of interest their physician may have in respect to their care.
9. To continuity of care. Patients should be able to expect that their physician will cooperate in coordinating medically indicated care with other health care professionals, and that the physician will not discontinue treating them when further treatment is medically indicated without giving them sufficient notice and reasonable assistance in making alternative arrangements for care."

A federal law called the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) applies to most health care institutions and practitioners. The act sets detailed rules regarding privacy, access to information, and disclosure of individually identifiable health information, referred to as protected health information.

Being Admitted to the Hospital

A hospital admission refers to the time that a patient occupies a hospital bed under the care of hospital staff. How patients are admitted to the hospital varies by individual circumstances, however, some parts of the process are consistent. Here, we will only be discussing circumstances where the patient is conscious and able to communicate with hospital staff. If that is not the case, certain steps would necessarily be skipped.

Types of Hospital Admissions

- Planned Admission – planned ahead of time for treatment or surgery
- Emergency Admission – for a condition that requires immediate medical attention
- Direct Admission – arranged by a physician for a patient to go directly from the doctor's office to the hospital for treatment.
- Transfer Admission - any scenario in which a patient is transferred from a hospital bed to another floor, department or hospital

What to Bring to the Hospital – Clerical

- ID Card
- Insurance Card
- Credit / Debit Card
- List of medications and supplements
- List of drug allergies
- Personal medical history
- Family medical history
- Advance directive
- Medical proxy contact information

When being admitted to a hospital, the patient will also need to provide:

- Signed authorization to release medical information to insurance company
- Signed hospital service agreement, includes consent to receive health care services and agreement to pay charges
- General description of the reason for your visit
- (Sometimes) Supporting paperwork from a referring physician

You will be given an identification bracelet to be worn on the wrist. Verify that the information on it is correct and wear it at all times.

After Admission

Once you get to your room, you will most likely be assessed by a nurse or a medical assistant. They may check your blood pressure, heart rate, temperature, and pain level. They will examine you and take a careful history and will then present your situation to the attending physician. From here, your specific condition will dictate what treatment you will receive. Expect that someone will come to have you change into a hospital gown, weigh you, take your blood, and place an intravenous catheter.

The Hospital Room

Of course, each hospital is a little different, but the hospital rooms will have some basic similarities. Each room will have one or two beds (yes, you may have a roommate). Each bed will have a curtain that can be pulled around it for privacy. The bed will be adjustable in height and allow the feet and head to move up and down. It will also have pieces on the sides that move up and down to keep the patient from rolling out of the bed. The patient will have access to a “call button” or remote that enables them to request help from a nurse. Often, a TV (with remote) and telephone will be in the room. Most hospital rooms will have a dry-erase board where the staff will write the day and date and their names so the patient knows who is caring for them on any given day. Each room usually has a bathroom with toilet and sink attached as well. This rest room will include a way to call for help if needed. There may also be a small closet for your personal belongings, a small table on wheels that can fit over the bed, and a chair or two for visitors. Other than that, only medical equipment, such as an IV pole, will likely be found in the room.

What to Bring to the Hospital – Personal

NOTE: All personal items should be labeled and valuables such as jewelry should be left at home. Unless you are taking prescription drugs that are exceptionally expensive, unusual, or hard-to-obtain, do not bring your own medications to the hospital.

- A personal advocate if you cannot be your own
- Underwear
- Deodorant
- Comb or brush, Razor
- Glasses, Hearing aids, Dentures
- Cell phone and charger
- Slippers or slip-on shoes
- Robe or shorts
- Some form of entertainment
- Paper and pencil
- A small bag to fit everything in
- CPAP machine, if you normally use one

A Day in the Hospital

What you do during a day in the hospital depends on your condition and why you are there. Your day might include:

- Taking your temperature
- Taking your blood pressure
- Administering medications
- Weighing you
- Cleaning your body
- Letting or helping you use the rest room
- Examining your body, wounds, bruises, or surgical sites
- Checking or changing your IV
- Having blood drawn
- Being brought food
- Being brought ice or water
- Being taken for tests
- Going for a walk
- Being seen by doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals

Who is My Doctor While I am in the Hospital?

Your attending physician is responsible for leading your health care team. Depending on the length of your stay and how well your recovery is progressing, your attending physician may change. While you are in the hospital, you may be assigned a doctor whose specialty is called “hospitalist.” A hospitalist is a doctor whose specialty is to focus on patient care inside a hospital. Your overall care may be handled by hospitalist doctor while you are a patient in the hospital. They will likely help coordinate care among other specialists, oversee medication administration, order and evaluate diagnostic tests, and create your discharge plan.

Having Surgery

If you are scheduled for surgery, you will be asked to do certain things ahead of time. For instance, you will not be allowed to eat or drink anything for a certain amount of time before the surgery. You also might be asked to drink something special or clean your body with a prescription soap ahead of time. You are asked to do these things to make the surgery safer for you. Try to follow the instructions as carefully as possible. You will be given medication in your IV to relax you and an anesthesiologist will speak to you before the surgery. If you have any specific concerns about being sedated during the surgery, now is the time to ask them. Don't be surprised to find the operating room to be very cold! They will offer you heated blankets if you need them. You can then expect to wake up in “recovery” after the surgery is complete. Be sure to ask your

surgeon ahead of time what to expect after surgery regarding pain, mobility, and recovery time.

General Comments

- Lots of people will be in and out of your room. If they don't introduce themselves, you can ask who they are and why they are there. You can ask them to write down their name, if you want.
- You may have different people caring for you each day.
- Every time someone comes to give you medication, either orally, by injection, or by IV, you can ask what the medication is, what it is for, and ask them to verify that it is the proper medication.
- If you have any medication allergies, do not hesitate to remind each person administering to you that you have allergies and what they are.
- You may have some input in what you eat, but your diet will, for the most part, be decided for you. Eat as best you can. It will help in your recovery. Do not have high expectations of the food. In general, do not eat food from outside the hospital during your hospital stay.
- When your food arrives, try to check it before food service leaves to be sure it is something you CAN eat. For instance, if you are diabetic, a breakfast of pancakes, syrup, and an orange might not be wise. If it is intolerable, ask for something else.
- You will be expected to undergo tests to help the doctors figure out how to best help you. You are entitled to understand what the test will involve, what the doctors hope to learn, and what the results mean.
- Whenever you are asked to sign forms, it is your right to be able to read the forms and understand them. Do not feel pressured to sign them if you cannot read or understand them. Ask for assistance.
- Do not expect to get a lot of sleep in the hospital. It can be a noisy place, and lots of people may be in and out of your room to check your temperature and blood pressure, take blood, or otherwise check on you throughout the day and night. If you think an eye shade or earplugs would help you rest, remember to pack them.

- Most hospitals have visiting hours based on your condition and what unit you are in. You also have the right to restrict visitors if you wish.
- Many hospitals which required visitors to park have long-term parking options. Have visits check at the information desk.
- If you really must bring electronics, such as a laptop, ask the hospital in advance if they offer lockable storage in the rooms. If they do, check to see if your belongings will fit inside.
- Most hospitals have a patient-family liaison who can guide you. For example, you can request a spiritual visit, a pain consult, or a nutritionist to help with your diet. Many hospitals have social workers who can help identify resources when it's time to go home.

Hospital Discharge

A hospital discharge marks the end of a patient's inpatient care. It means that the patient is to either return home or be transferred to a continuing care facility. The patient always receives discharge paperwork, which consists of the following:

- An explanation of why the patient was admitted to the hospital
- The diagnosis along with any relevant findings
- A detailed summary of the patient's hospital stay
- The status of the patient's medical condition at the time of discharge
- The signature of the presiding physician
- A detailed hospital discharge plan:
 - A detailed breakdown of the patient's medical issues (including allergies)
 - A full listing of medications with detailed instructions on how to take them
 - Detailed instructions on wound care (if applicable)
 - The dates and times of follow-up appointments along with relevant contact information
 - Information on contacts to reach in case of emergency and for general questions
 - Dietary restrictions (if applicable)
 - Activity-level guidelines

Resources:

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/an-insiders-guide-to-a-hospital-stay-2018071814266>

<https://www.uwmedicine.org/patient-resources/preparing-for-your-appointment-or-hospital-stay>

<https://www.verywellhealth.com/what-to-pack-for-the-hospital-3157006>

<https://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/what-is-a-hospitalist-doctor>

<https://www.merckmanuals.com/home/special-subjects/hospital-care/being-admitted-to-the-hospital>

<https://www.britannica.com/science/hospital>

<https://healthadministrationdegree.usc.edu/blog/what-to-expect-when-admitted-to-the-hospital/>

<https://fortworthreport.org/2021/10/07/explainer-how-does-hospital-staffing-work-anyway/>

<https://www.verywellhealth.com/hospital-floors-and-units-3156895>

<https://code-medical-ethics.ama-assn.org/ethics-opinions/patient-rights>

<https://www.merckmanuals.com/home/fundamentals/legal-and-ethical-issues/confidentiality-and-hipaa>