

CAREGIVER'S *corner*

BY LISA M. PETSCHÉ

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✧ Practical Tips for When Your Parent is Hospitalized ✧

There's a good chance your aging parent will require hospitalization at some point, especially if he or she has chronic health conditions. If your parent relies primarily on you for assistance, the following are some tips to help you be prepared.

What to Bring

- Be ready with the following paperwork to bring to the hospital: a list of current medications—prescription and over-the-counter drugs as well as vitamins and other natural remedies—and the dosage; health insurance information; and a copy of any advance directive, living will or durable power of attorney.
- Be prepared to provide nursing staff with an alternate contact person in case you're not available in an emergency. Provide as many phone numbers as possible—home, work, cell—to maximize the chances one of you can be reached in a hurry.
- Keep a note pad and pen with you. (It's wise to maintain a log of your parent's diagnoses, past and present medications and any adverse reactions, specialists consulted, hospitalizations and surgeries.)
- Clothing-wise, bring pajamas, a robe and non-skid slippers for nighttime. For daytime, provide comfortable clothing that's easy to put on, such as loose-fitting shirts, pants, skirts or dresses. If your parent will be participating in physical therapy, track suits and running shoes are advisable. Don't forget socks and underwear.
- The following grooming items will also be needed: soap, deodorant, shampoo, a toothbrush and toothpaste or denture cleaner, comb or hairbrush, hand mirror and razor.
- Don't forget to bring dentures, eyeglasses, hearing aids and prostheses. Bring a denture cup and eyeglass or hearing aid case for proper storage, and label or engrave whatever belongings you can. If your parent uses a cane, walker or wheelchair, let staff know and be prepared to bring it in.



What Not to Bring

- For security reasons, discourage your relative from keeping anything of value—cash, identification or jewelry—in the room. You might, however, wish to leave a few dollars to cover the cost of sundry items, such as newspapers or snacks.

- Don't bring in prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications or herbal remedies. Interactions with medications the hospital physician has prescribed could prove harmful. The same goes for alcohol.

Communicating with Care Providers

- Find out who the coordinator is within the health care team. Usually it's one of the nursing staff, known by a title such as primary nurse or case manager. This person will be your main contact.
- Maintain good communication with other family members, keeping them up-to-date on your parent's status, activities and plans. (Addressing similar questions or concerns with multiple people takes professionals away from direct patient work.) If necessary, set up a conference call or request a family meeting.
- If other disciplines--such as a physical therapist or speech language pathologist--are involved, ask the care coordinator for their name and telephone extension so you can contact them directly if needed. If you call, be prepared to leave a concise voice mail message that includes the best times to reach you during the day. If you're hard to reach, set an appointment to talk by phone or in person.
- Write down key information provided during conversations and at care conferences. Request a layperson's explanation if you don't understand medical jargon used. Always ask for clarification when you don't understand information or instructions.
- If you feel the need for emotional support for yourself or your parent, ask for a referral to the social worker or chaplain, depending on the nature of the distress.

Visiting Tips

- If your parent is in a shared room, limit visiting to a few people at a time and speak softly. Exercise good judgment when it comes to bringing children, and ensure adult supervision at all times.
- Find out your parent's schedule and don't visit around therapy times unless you've been invited to participate.
- Consult with nursing staff before bringing in food or beverages, in case dietary restrictions have been implemented.
- If your parent is expected to remain in hospital for more than a week, inquire about the availability of a parking pass.

Discharge planning

- Depending on your parent's condition when the acute phase of his illness is over, he may be able to return home, or require transfer to a nursing facility for convalescent care, a rehabilitation facility for reactivation or a nursing home for long-term care. The team social worker or the hospital discharge planner (who may be a social worker or a nurse) can assist you with problem solving and making necessary arrangements.
- A good discharge plan involves the patient, significant others (family or friends) and healthcare providers. It addresses issues around medical management, activities of daily living (self-care and home management skills), mobility, safety and finances, as well as psychosocial needs. It also addresses related concerns such as transportation to medical appointments, recreation and leisure needs and caregiver relief, as appropriate.
- If your parent is returning home, clarify his medication needs and ensure necessary prescriptions are provided before discharge. Obtain details about services being arranged, including contact information for providers. Also inquire about follow-up medical appointments and tests, including who is responsible for arranging them.



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