

House Calls

How to Be a Good Medical Consumer

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

Being a good consumer is the American way. Being a good consumer does not just mean doing your homework prior to purchasing a new vehicle or major appliance. It means doing your best to protect your most important investment (YOU) from harm. Although we don't particularly like to contemplate it, we do now and then find ourselves in harms' way. Whether it be an accident, an unexpected acute illness, or a random minor bronchial infection, we need to remember to always ask the right questions when it comes to our healthcare.

Unfortunately medical errors can involve any aspect of health care, including medication use, lab reports, diagnostic procedures, surgery, and other treatments. You can help prevent these errors from happening to you and your family by following a few simple recommendations.

Be informed and prepared when seeking healthcare. Research shows that people who are concerned and aware are more likely to carry out their prescribed treatment and are less likely to suffer from medical errors. Take part in healthcare decisions involving you and your family members. Work with your health care team to make good decisions. Ask plenty of pertinent questions and discuss alternate available treatment options.

Keep up to date health records. Always share all of your health history with your medical provider. Having a list of the current medications you take, even over the counter preparations including nutritional and herbal supplements are extremely helpful for your practitioner to review. Be sure to also inform him or her of any allergies you may have. I always try to tell my patients exactly what the medication is that I'm prescribing, acknowledge that I have reviewed their medication list, and there should be no interactions, and inform them exactly how they should be taking the medication I prescribed. Then, when they receive their prescriptions from the pharmacy, they know what to expect, and if they receive something different than what I prepared them for, they can ask the pharmacist for an explanation. Therefore, it's a

good idea to ask your prescribing practitioner what the name of the medication is you will be receiving, how you will be taking it, and for how long.

Be actively involved in your health care. Ask plenty of questions. If you don't understand something, ask for an explanation until you do. Learn all you can about your health condition. If that particular provider is not explaining your condition in terms that you understand and are comfortable with, seek a second opinion.

Make sure you get the results of every test and understand what they mean. Whenever you go for a test, ask when you should expect the results to be called or sent to you. If you have not received the results in an appropriate amount of time, call for them yourself. Be sure you speak with someone that can explain any abnormal results to you. Remember those results are yours, if you want a copy for your files, ask for one. If you find you don't always remember things your medical provider tells you, ask a family member or a trusted friend to accompany you to your appointments to listen to instructions and ask questions on your behalf. If you suspect a medical error, the first thing you should do is bring it to the attention of your medical provider, so it may be explained or corrected immediately. When you get in the practice of becoming a wise healthcare consumer, you are much less likely to encounter a medical error, and your investment in yourself will stay protected.

Rikki Schuster, PA-C is a certified physician assistant, who has been treating patients for over 10 years in the ER and Urgent Care Settings. She is currently practicing with Medical House Calls, and is accepting new patients. For more information, please call 252-475-2007.