

HOW TO CHOOSE A HOSPITAL

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN SELECTING YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER

If you were one of the approximately 37 million Americans admitted to a hospital last year for a procedure or treatment, you mostly likely went to the facility that your doctor recommended, was close to your home or was on your healthcare plan without giving it too much thought. In fact, more research probably went into your latest cellphone purchase than into your hospital selection.

Although it's true that your hospital options may be limited by location, a referral or insurance coverage, you have more choices than you think, and there's critically important research that you can – and should – do before you're admitted as a patient. Here are some of the most important questions to ask and where to find the information:

• Is the hospital nationally accredited? What does that mean and how do you find out?

"Accreditation is a way to determine whether a hospital is compliant with the best practice quality standards," said Barbara O'Connell, co-founder of WhereToFindCare.com, which compiles data on patients' satisfaction with healthcare providers and supplies information from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. "Accreditation programs differ, but it generally means the hospital is audited on a regular basis by people who look very carefully at medical records, treatments and processes to make sure they meet established standards of quality."

There are three national accrediting organizations approved by CMS: the Det Norske Veritas or DNV (www.dnvaccreditation.org), the American Osteopathic Assn. Healthcare Facilities Accreditation Program (www.hfap.org), and the Joint Commission (www.qualitycheck.org).

"Ask your doctor whether he or she thinks a difference in hospital ratings from different sources is important or not. If it is important, what does the doctor think [the hospital] should do about it?" said John Santa, director of the Health Ratings Center for Consumer Reports.

The Health Ratings Center (www.consumerreports.org) offers state-by-state hospital ratings based on responses from more than 1 million patients in a federal government survey.

You can also check for facilities that have earned American Nurses Credentialing Center Magnet Recognition, which recognizes hospitals that provide excellent nursing care, suggested Maggie Radany, president of Radany & Associates, an organization of registered nurses who provide healthcare advocacy services.

• What are the hospital's mortality, complication and surgical site infection rates?

Start by checking the hospital's website; if you can't find the information there, call the quality department and ask. Mortality information is also available from an annual survey conducted by the Leapfrog Group (www.leapfroggroup.org), a coal-

ition of employer healthcare buyers that provides a broad assessment of a hospital's quality and safety.

"We have a measure called Survivor Predictor, which uses mortality rates from a prior year and the volume of specific procedures that hospital performs," said Leah Binder, CEO of the Washington D.C.-based group. Other resources include www.whynotthebest.org, www.calhospitalcompare.org and www.jointcommission.org.

"Surgical infection rates are one of the Joint Commission's core measures, and most hospitals are putting the results on their websites for transparency," according to Mark Pelletier, executive director of hospital programs and accreditation and certification services for the Joint Commission.

• What is the nurse-to-patient ratio?

The ratio is the maximum number of patients one nurse can provide care for at a time. "Some states have mandatory reporting of the nurse/patient ratio, and California has been at the forefront of this," Pelletier said. Go to www.calnurses.org for more information, and also ask the head of the hospital's nursing department.

"There is research showing that outcomes for some conditions are correlated with nurse/patient ratios, and adequate staffing undoubtedly affects patient and nurse satisfaction," Radany said.

And don't forget who you deal with most: the nurses. "Most of the clinicians you see in a given day are nurses; the safety and quality of your care is determined by the quality of the nursing care," Binder added. "It's really a key issue not to be overlooked."

• Is the hospital covered by my insurance plan?

Go to your healthcare plan's website or call them directly, and you may also want to check with the hospital's financial counseling office. "Ask for a pre-admission review of benefits from your insurance provider," O'Connell said. "However, just because your hospital is in-network doesn't mean that specific services you are seeking are a covered benefit; work with your insurance plan closely."

• Can I take a tour of the facility?

Hospital tours are common mainly in the maternity and pediatrics units, but you should request one no matter

which area you will be admitted to. Ask the guest relations department. If there isn't one, ask to speak with someone in administration. Just be reasonable in your request: "You should be allowed to look around public areas on your own, but access to some areas [like critical care units] may be limited for health and safety reasons," O'Connell said.

• Are the hospital and the doctor experienced in your specific medical procedure?

The best sources for these answers are the hospital's quality department and your physician. "There's definitely a relationship between volume and outcomes, especially for complex surgeries that are relatively rarely done," Santa said.

The Bottom Line

Look at all the information and make the best decision you can. And bring someone with you during your hospital stay, Santa suggested. "No matter how organized you are, healthcare is really complex and you need someone to help you navigate it."

—MAUREEN HEALY
Special Advertising Sections Writer

