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Make Your Hospital Stay A Healthy Experience

Chances are that you or a family member will be hospitalized in the coming year. Typically, patients entering the hospital are in a vulnerable state and may not be thinking too clearly, particularly “first timers.” But fortunately, a practicing physician and educator, Gail Gazelle, M.D., has recently penned a thought-provoking booklet that advises how to take charge of one’s hospital stay. *Don’t Leave the Hospital SICKER Than You Went In! A Doctor’s 106 Tips for a Healthy & Safe Hospital Experience* offers sage advice from Dr. Gazelle, an Assistant Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School and staff member at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. Among her many insightful suggestions:

Tip #4: Pick an assertive person to be your advocate. Doctors can be intimidating. The white coat and busy schedule can make you feel like the doctor has to attend to matters that are more important than you. Remember, you are important! Choose an advocate who is assertive and not afraid to ask questions.

Tip #23: Always bring a list of all medications you are taking, both prescription and over-the-counter. You may be due for one of your medications or there could be interactions between what you are taking and a new medication doctors want to start.

Tip #32: Never give your dentures, hearing aids, eyeglasses or other personal appliances to hospital staff. These items frequently get lost. You spent time and money having these fitted and you should not risk losing them.

Tip #43: Request and write down the name of anyone entering your room. You will find that many people enter your room—doctors, doctors-in-training, medical students, nurses, nurses’ aides, food handlers and other hospital employees. You have a right to know who is coming and going and why they are there. The person who mentioned something important might be the one whose name you forget. We all forget details when we are under stress.

Tip #44: Record all interactions with doctors and nurses. Unfortunately, mistakes and mis-communication can occur. By keeping track, you will be in a better position to retrace your steps.

Tip #57: Do not be afraid to speak up if you don’t understand what’s happening or what the doctor is saying. Medical language can be very complicated and it’s easy to get confused. You deserve to have things explained in a way that makes sense to you.

Tip #59: Make sure your privacy is respected. Whenever there is a discussion of important or sensitive information, ask for a private room to meet in.

Tip #67: Ask the nurses and doctors if they have washed their hands. While it may seem impolite, just tell them that you have a germ phobia! At some hospitals, all employees wear buttons that say, “Ask me if I have washed my hands.” They do this to empower you to ask.

Tip #75: Ask questions about every test your doctor proposes. Does the test require any special preparation? Will the test be painful? Are there possible complications that the test can cause? The more information you have, the better prepared you can be.

Tip #84: Don’t let the doctor operate on the wrong side of your body! This sounds obvious but sometimes it happens. Make sure you know which side of your body needs the surgery. On the day of the surgery, you and your advocate should remind everyone involved in your care which side this is. Even if you feel like you are being a pest, it is worth it to make sure you don’t have surgery on the wrong side of your body. © 2007 by Gail Gazelle, MD

To learn more about Dr. Gazelle’s publications and services or sign up for her “Free Tips Newsletter,” go to www.MDCanHelp.com. And remember that before, during and after your hospital stay, your EAP is available 24/7 to provide you with supportive stress relief counseling.