Everyone has a role in making health care safe. That includes doctors, health care executives, nurses and many health care technicians. Health care organizations all across the country are working to make health care safe. As a patient, you can make your care safer by being an active, involved and informed member of your health care team.

An Institute of Medicine report says that medical mistakes are a serious problem in the health care system. The IOM says that public awareness of the problem is an important step in making things better.

The "Speak Up" program is sponsored by The Joint Commission. They agree that patients should be involved in their own health care. These efforts to increase patient awareness and involvement are also supported by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

This program gives simple advice on how you can help make health care a good experience. Research shows that patients who take part in decisions about their own health care are more likely to get better faster. To help prevent health care mistakes, patients are urged to "Speak Up."

The Joint Commission is the largest health care accrediting body in the United States that promotes quality and safety.

Helping health care organizations help patients
Speak up if you have questions or concerns. If you still do not understand, ask again. It is your body and you have a right to know.

- Your health is very important. Do not worry about being embarrassed if you do not understand something that your doctor, nurse or other health care professional tells you. If you do not understand because you speak another language, ask for someone who speaks your language. You have the right to get free help from someone who speaks your language.
- Do not be afraid to ask about safety. If you are having surgery, ask the doctor to mark the area that is to be operated on.
- Do not be afraid to tell the nurse or the doctor if you think you are about to get the wrong medicine.
- Do not be afraid to tell a health care professional if you think he or she has confused you with another patient. Ask a trusted family member or friend to be your advocate (advisor or supporter).

Ask your doctor about the special training and experience they have had The Joint Commission’s quality standards are following. For example, The Joint Commission visits hospitals to see if they are meeting The Joint Commission’s quality standards. You and your doctor should agree on exactly what will be done during each step of your care.

Ask your doctor which one has the best care for your condition. Ask about why you should take the medicine. Ask for written information about it, including its brand and generic names. Also ask about the side effects of all medicines.

- Do not recognize a medicine, double-check that it is for you. Ask about medicines that you are to take by mouth before you swallow them. Read the contents of the bags of intravenous (IV) fluids. If you are not well enough to do this, ask your advocate to do it.
- If you are given an IV, ask the nurse how long it should take for the liquid to run out. Tell the nurse if it does not seem to be dripping right (too fast or too slow).
- Whenever you get a new medicine, tell your doctors and nurses about allergies you have, or negative reactions you have had to other medicines.
- If you are taking a lot of medicines, be sure to ask your doctor or pharmacist if it is safe to take those medicines together. Do the same thing with vitamins, herbs and over-the-counter drugs.
- Make sure you can read the handwriting on prescriptions written by your doctor. If you cannot read it, the pharmacist may not be able to either. Ask somebody at the doctor’s office to print the prescription, if necessary.
- Carry an up-to-date list of the medicines you are taking in your purse or wallet. Write down how much you take and when you take it. Go over the list with your doctor and other caregivers.

You are the center of the health care team.

- Do not be afraid to ask for a second opinion. If you are unsure about the best treatment for your illness, talk with one or two additional doctors. The more information you have about all the kinds of treatment available to you, the better you will feel about the decisions made.
- Ask your doctor to recommend a support group you can join to help deal with your condition. People in these groups may help you prepare for the days and weeks ahead. They may be able to tell you what to expect and what worked best for them.
- Talk to your doctor and your family about your wishes regarding resuscitation and other life-saving actions.

S

E

P

K

T

W

X

Y

Z

The goal of the Speak Up™ program is to help patients and their advocates become more informed and involved in their health care.