

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

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Are You a Wise Health Consumer?

More and more, Americans are being asked to become partners in their own health care in an effort to provide the best care possible for each individual. February is Wise Health Consumer Month, which is a perfect time to reflect on ways in which we can improve our chances of getting the quality of care we desire. While high quality health care can help us stay healthy and recover quickly when we are ill or injured, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services notes that a 2004 study of 12 large communities in this country found only 55% of the people were receiving the care they needed. In other words, about 45% of Americans are not receiving the care they need.

While health care providers and the government are constantly working at improving health care for Americans, individuals also have a role to play. The key is to become an active member of the health care team. Do not expect your doctor to make all your health care decisions. They should be made by you and your health care providers together. The Department of Health and Human Services suggests some tips to help Americans improve their own health care:

1. Do not be afraid to ask questions. When visiting with your physician, Make sure you understand your diagnosis; ask what you need to do to improve your health or get better. If you need laboratory tests or X-rays, ask your doctor how the test is done, how accurate it is, are there any risks associated with having the test, when can you expect to have the results, and what do you do if you do not receive the results.
2. Learn as much as you can about your condition. Ask your doctor to explain the science behind your condition and your treatment options, and where you can get further information. Research your condition at the library or by going online.
3. Once you have determined the information you have is from a reliable source, use only quality information to assist you in making your health care decisions.

Ultimately, it is your responsibility to get the information you need. When visiting with your physician, make sure you understand your diagnosis; ask what you need to do to improve your health or get better. If you need laboratory tests or X-rays, ask your doctor how the test is done, how accurate it is, are there any risks associated with having the test, when can you expect to have the results, and what do you do if you do not receive the results. If you are afraid you will not remember everything, take notes while the doctor is speaking, prepare and bring a list of questions with you, or ask a friend or relative to accompany you to help ask questions and understand the information.

If your doctor prescribes medication for you, be sure you know the name of the drug, what it is supposed to do, when and how much medicine do you take, and what are the possible side effects. It is also a good idea to remind your physician of other medication you are taking and ask if there are any adverse drug

interactions. Once your prescription is filled, be sure to read the label carefully to confirm that the medication is what the doctor ordered, and to become aware of any warnings.

If surgery is recommended by your doctor, you need to be clear about the type of surgery you will have and why you need it. Ask about both the benefits and the risks associated with having the operation, what will happen if you do not have the surgery, how long it will take to recover, and if there are other treatments you could try besides surgery. Also ask for suggestions about where to obtain a second opinion. If you get a second opinion, be sure to bring copies of your records from the first doctor so the tests will not have to be repeated.

For any treatment, test, or operation, find out if your insurance plan will cover the costs, or how much it will cost you. When you have all the necessary information, take all the time you need to make your health decisions. Talk with family and friends who may have had similar experiences to get the support you need.

Researching your condition and treatment options may seem like a formidable task, but there is a lot of information available dealing with quality health care. For example, hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers have reports on their quality that they can share with you. If you have managed care, you can contact the provider of your health plan to obtain quality reports. You can also find out if the institution is accredited, meaning it has met specific standards set by an independent organization or the government. Inquire about your doctor's training and experience, and find out if he or she has received high ratings for quality of care.

Some resources you may want to investigate include the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality at www.ahrq.gov/consumer/ (1-800-358-9295), the National Institutes of Health at www.nih.gov, Medicare at www.medicare.gov (1-800-633-4227), or the American Medical Association at www.ama-assn.org (1-800-621-8335). For additional information about this or other public health topics, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at www.ccthd.org (860-721-2822).