

## Choosing The Right Hospital

How can you choose the best quality hospital for the care you need? It is important to consider quality, because research shows that some hospitals simply do a better job than others. For example, we know that hospitals that do a greater number of the same surgeries have better outcomes for their patients.

### What Type of Hospital Do I need?

Different types of hospitals offer different benefits.

*A community hospital* provides convenient care for emergencies, common conditions such as heart disease; imaging services such as X-ray, ultrasound, or MRI; and numerous outpatient procedures. Community hospitals offer close proximity and convenience.

*Secondary hospitals* offer all of the above, and they support physicians in the fields of general surgery, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, and related medical services for these areas.

*Tertiary hospitals or care centers* provide more advanced care in the areas listed above as well as perinatology, neonatology, surgical specialties, psychiatry, intensive care, and other specialties. Patients from smaller hospitals are often referred to tertiary care centers for consultations with specialists and for major surgeries.

The term '*quarternary hospitals*' is less common in the US than some other countries, but refers to hospitals that provide the most advanced, highly specialized care available, including experimental procedures.

*Academic medical centers* such as Columbia University Medical Center include comprehensive patient care for the full spectrum of conditions, they conduct basic and clinical research, and they train physicians and surgeons. Academic medical centers provide advantages such high levels of experience with serious or rare conditions, availability of clinical trials, and access to top experts in specialized fields.

### Quick Check for Quality

Look for a hospital that:

- Is accredited by The Joint Commission (formerly the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations).
- Is rated highly by State or consumer or other groups.
- Is one where your doctor has privileges, if that is important to you.
- Is covered by your health plan.
- Has experience with your condition.
- Has had success with your condition.
- Checks and works to improve its own quality of care.

The following questions can help you make the best choices. At the end you will be able to print out your results summary for the hospital you are considering.

You may not have a choice right now because of your health plan or doctor. But keep these questions in mind for when you might make a change.

### Does the hospital meet national quality standards?

Yes  No

Hospitals can choose to be surveyed by The Joint Commission to make sure they meet certain quality

standards. The standards address the quality of staff and equipment, and—most recently—the hospital's success in treating and curing patients. If a hospital meets those standards, it becomes accredited (gets a "seal of approval"). Reviews are done at least every 3 years. Most hospitals participate in this program.

The Joint Commission prepares a performance report on each hospital that it surveys. The report lists: Accreditation status (six levels—from the lowest, "Not Accredited," to the highest, "Accredited with Commendation").

Date of the survey.

Evaluation of the key areas reviewed during the survey.

Results of any followup activity.

Areas needing improvement.

Comparison with national results.

You can order The Joint Commission's performance reports free of charge by calling 630-792-5800.

Or, check its Web site at [www.jointcommission.org](http://www.jointcommission.org) for a hospital's performance report or for its accreditation status.

### **How does the hospital compare with others in my area?**

One important way to learn about hospital quality is to look at hospital report cards developed by States and consumer groups. A recent study about such reports found that besides helping consumers make informed choices, they also encourage hospitals to improve their quality of care. This is a very good reason to look for and use consumer information about hospitals. Here are some ways to find such information:

Some States—for example, Pennsylvania, California, and Ohio—have laws that require hospitals to report data on the quality of their care. The information is then given to the public so consumers can compare hospitals.

Some groups gather information on how well hospitals perform and how satisfied their patients are. An example is the Cleveland Health Quality Choice Program, which is made up of businesses, doctors, and hospitals.

Consumer groups publish guides to hospitals and other health care choices in various cities. Find out what kind of information is available where you live by calling your State department of health, health care council, or hospital association. Also, ask your doctor what he or she thinks about the hospital.

### **Does my doctor have privileges at the hospital (is permitted to admit patients)?**

Yes  No

If not, you would need to be under the care of another doctor while at the hospital.

### **Does my health plan cover care at the hospital?**

Yes  No

If not, do you have another way to pay for your care?

If going to a certain hospital is important to you, keep that in mind when choosing a doctor and/or health plan. In general, you will go to the hospital where your doctor has "privileges."

### **Does the hospital have experience with my condition?**

Yes  No

For example, "general" hospitals handle a wide range of routine conditions, such as hernias and pneumonia. "Specialty" hospitals have a lot of experience with certain conditions (such as cancer) or certain groups (such as children). You may be able to choose General Hospital "X" for gallbladder surgery, Specialty Hospital "Y" if you need care for a heart condition, and Specialty Hospital "Z" for

your children.

You also may want to find out if the hospital has a special team of health professionals that works with people with your condition or treatment.

### **Has the hospital had success with my condition?**

Yes  No

Research shows that hospitals that do many of the same types of procedures tend to have better success with them. In other words, "practice makes perfect." Ask your doctor or the hospital if there is information on:

How often the procedure is done there.

How often the doctor does the procedure.

The patient outcomes (how well the patients do).

Also, some health departments and others publish reports on "outcomes studies" about certain procedures. These studies show, for example, how well patients do after having heart bypass surgery. Such studies can help you compare which hospitals and surgeons have had the most success with a procedure.

### **How well does the hospital check and improve on its own quality of care?**

More and more hospitals are trying to improve the quality of their care. One way is to keep track of patient outcomes for certain procedures. Another way is to keep track of patient injuries and infections that occur in the hospital. By finding out what works and what doesn't, the hospital can improve the way it treats patients.

Ask the hospital quality management (or assurance) department how it monitors and improves the hospital's quality of care. Also, ask for any patient satisfaction surveys the hospital has done. These will tell you how other patients have rated the quality of their care.

Don't forget to request a patient's handbook from each hospital you're considering. These handbooks typically answer most questions you might have.

### **Your Needs**

- Is your doctor affiliated with the hospital? Physicians are typically affiliated with a number of hospitals, which means that they have met the requirements of that hospital and are permitted to practice there.
- Do they offer services that meet your particular needs? In terms of why you're going to a hospital to begin with, i.e. breast or heart surgery.
- What is their experience with doing your procedure? Maybe they see 2 cases per year, maybe 200. To some degree, the more the better.
- Who manages your personal care?

In other words, how easy will it be for you or family and friends to find out how you're doing? • How big is their referral network?

What arrangements do they have with other facilities to provide services they themselves cannot?

### **Staff**

- How many registered nurses (RNs) are on staff? The AHA says on average in the US, this amounts to around four RNs to every licensed practical nurse (LPN).
- What is the nurse-to-patient ratio? One nurse can effectively care for 3-6 patients (in anywhere but the ICU, where it's more like one nurse to every 1-2 patients)  
Who is their infection control practitioner? They may not have one, but someone in the hospital should be in charge of coordinating infection control, since as many as 5 percent of patients in

the US pick up a hospital-acquired illness during their stay.

- Who is the ombudsman? Ombudsmen work as go-betweens for patients and their complaints, so if the hospital doesn't have one, ask who handles patient complaints.
- How many social workers are on staff? Social workers aide patients in dealing with everything except the actual procedure, such as emotional, social, clinical, physical, and financial issues.

### **Facilities**

- Do they accept Medicare patients? A good question to ask even if you aren't on Medicare, since if the answer is no, they may be on probation or been suspended from the program and you would like to find out why.
- Is the hospital clean? Visit it and look around. Ask to see the waiting rooms and patient care rooms. Do they look comfortable? Would you want to recuperate in the patient rooms? How much privacy would you have in these rooms?
- Can I take care of some testing on an outpatient basis? Getting X-rays etc before being admitted can save you money.
- What departments are available at all hours? Lab, x-ray, emergency, operating room?
- When are visiting hours? Where can you use your cell phone? Is there a courtyard available?
- What about diet needs? Request to see a weekly menu; if it doesn't look too good, ask if guests can bring you food.
- Is it in a convenient location? Convenient to you, to friends and family who might want to visit. Find out if there is a public transit stop near by, and what the parking situation is.