

Treated and discharged: How to avoid repeat hospital visit

Adapted from:

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The Bottom Line

- A hospital visit is not necessarily a “once and done” event. Some patients, including older adults and those with certain chronic conditions, become frequent emergency room visitors.
- Knowing risk of readmission and having a thorough discharge care plan gives patients and their caregivers the necessary information and instruction for effective post-treatment care.
- Once back home, enlisting home and community supports and making healthy lifestyle changes will help improve the chances of avoiding a repeat hospital visit.

After returning home from a fabulous vacation or an enjoyable visit with family or friends, you might be keen to go back again. You may even begin making plans for a future trip. Not so when it comes to a hospital stay: whether it was a scheduled surgery or a sudden health scare that took you there, once your loved one has been treated and cleared to leave you're not planning to come back anytime soon! Yet many do, and often.

Frequent use of emergency department and other hospital services has major implications for healthcare systems but also for the patients who tend to have ongoing health problems and a lower life expectancy. Since many repeat hospital visits are due to fear, compounded by uncertainty about what to do and expect after going home it's essential that patients and caregivers receive clear instructions and have access to the appropriate follow-up care.

Want to avoid repeat trips to the hospital? The following evidence-based tips are a great starting point.

1. Predict the risk

In Canada, nearly one in ten acute-care patients return to the emergency department after leaving the hospital. Some people – including older adults– are more likely to be among that 10%. Age, medical condition, chronic diseases and other factors can put your loved one at higher risk and in need of extra support and strategies for staying well while staying away from the hospital.

You can advocate for care by asking about risk for readmission and what it means for discharge and care needs.

2. Make a care plan

A comprehensive, tailored care plan – based on your care recipient’s health history and unique circumstances – is an important step towards a successful recovery and reduces

the risk of suffering complications that could send them back to hospital. Discharge care plans include clearly outlined steps to follow once you leave the hospital and are an effective way to avoid going back. In some cases the plan will involve “case management” in which members of multidisciplinary teams (doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers etc.) play a role in developing and carrying out the care plan. Don’t leave the hospital without asking healthcare providers about developing an appropriate discharge plan that will meet your loved one’s unique needs.

3. Recruit the pharmacist

Older adults and others who take multiple medications are at risk of serious side effects due to drug interactions, which can result in a trip to the hospital. It’s a good idea to get a pharmacist involved even before leaving the hospital to conduct a medication review and give instructions about prescriptions, including the correct timing and dosage. Pharmicare and most private health insurance policies will cover an annual medication review so speak to your local pharmacist or insurance provider for more information.

Once at home, keep your pharmacist in the loop by keeping track of any medications taken and how often, asking for advice and pamphlets about prescriptions, and enlisting their help to dispose of any unused or expired medications.

4. Access post-treatment care

Sometimes recovery includes follow-up care delivered by medical professionals. But that doesn’t always have to be in a hospital setting. Home Care nursing visits or and multi-disciplinary or nurse-led clinics are effective options for some people recovering from conditions. For people living in areas without specialty clinics or services, support by 8-1-1 can work well to check on your condition, help manage symptoms and determine whether your loved one needs to see a doctor.

5. Commit to making lifestyle changes

Often, an unplanned hospital visit is a “wake-up call” for people whose diagnosis was complicated by poor diet, lack of exercise, smoking, substance use or a combination of life-style factors. It’s never too late to make changes that will improve health and wellness – and keep you away from the emergency room.

6. Don’t go until you know

If you have to spend time in the hospital, ideally it's a short stay involving a successful and effective treatment. You may be eager to get back home, but before discharge, make sure you have the information you need and fully understand all the components of the care plan. By preventing a repeat visit to the hospital you'll have the time and energy to plan more enjoyable trips for when your loved one is fully recovered!

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