

A Caregiver's Hospital Survival Kit: 20 Must-Have Items

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by Amy Goyer Posted on 04/17/2012

In the past year, I've spent close to 40 overnights in the hospital with my parents, plus roughly 10 emergency room visits with them. I dislike going to hospitals ... a lot.

I think I've developed some sort of post-traumatic stress disorder around hospital visits. I find that I am great in the moment and deal with crises easily, but afterwards I am exhausted and when the time comes to venture off to the hospital again I tense up, feel a sense of dread and my stomach goes into knots. Clearly, Mom and Dad don't like to go either.

Our ER visits have never taken less than 6 hours for us, and those lovely little cubicles aren't exactly comfy cozy.

Sleep or rest in a hospital? Not hardly. It's cold, machines are beeping, vitals being taken and medicines dispensed at all hours along with blood draws, x-rays and other tests.

So, how do I survive these visits? Over the past three years of intensive caregiving, I've developed my "hospital survival kit" to help keep my parents as comfortable as possible, aid in their healing and keep myself occupied and calm as well.

Thought I'd share some must-have items with you:

1. Chargers – They're first on the list for a reason. My iPad is loaded with movies, calming music or favourite tunes (big band for my parents!) I also take copious notes on everything that happens during a hospital stay (doctors, medications, tests, treatments, questions etc.) and email them to my sisters so they stay apprised.

A copy of their medications list and medical history are stored on my iPad and phone. Most hospitals have free WiFi now, even in the ER, and allow use of cell phones (if you can get a signal.) Facebook posts also bring lots of virtual support from friends and family on an up to the minute basis and have helped me through many a tense and lonely time in the hospital.

2. Healthy snacks – Nuts, air-popped popcorn, brown rice chips, granola etc. The hospital cafeteria and vending machines are usually packed with unhealthy comfort food, which is sometimes necessary, but I just end up feeling worse if I eat too much of that stuff.

3. Several magazines – For Mom and me to look at and a book or something I can read to Daddy.
4. Warm and comfy clothes – I wear sweat pants and long sleeved shirt. No jeans. I bring warm jackets for all of us because it's always so darned cold in hospitals. My Dad's hat is a must (one of his chief complaints – his head gets cold) A colourful shawl or throw blanket for Mom – hospital rooms are so dull. A cheerful color goes a long way.
5. Really good moisturizers – Lip balm and Mentholatum or Vicks ointment to keep our noses moist. Good thick hand cream can be used every time we wash our hands, which is often, and is great for hand or foot massages to calm my parents.
6. Saline nose spray – I like the Xlear brand with Xylitol. Can prevent bacteria breathed in hospital from adhering to the nasal passages. Sometimes that's not enough. When Dad started to develop sinus problems during a hospital stay I asked the doctor if I could bring in a vaporizer – no problem! Glad I asked. And don't forget good, soft tissues from home – ditch the rough and scratchy cheap ones the hospital supplies.
7. Nicely scented antibacterial hand gel – While it's often available from wall units in hospitals, it's drying and smells nasty. I like the lavender scented gel - makes us all feel special.
8. My soft, fuzzy green blanket – The texture is wonderful, the color is calming. Mom and Dad get lovely heated blankets and I don't hesitate to ask for them frequently.
9. My own pillow – With a good cover on it and pillowcase to protect against picking up germs. They usually don't want Mom and Dad to use their own pillow in the hospital bed though.
10. Mom and/or Dad's slippers and robe and a change of clothes for their homecoming. I also bring my slippers – I can stay more relaxed in their room if I wear my slippers – psychological? Perhaps. But if it works, do it. I keep an easy to wash pair just for hospital visits. Also hairbrush, ponytail holders, hair clips.
11. A small flashlight – To read or find things in the room when they are asleep.
12. Eye mask – For me or them. Keeps us from waking up any time someone opens the door during the night.
13. A sound machine – A portable one or iPad app with calming nature sounds or white noise. It blocks out the beeping and other disturbing hospital noises.
14. Room spray – A friend gave my Mom a beautiful scent when she broke her hip and it's amazing how spraying that makes us all feel better. It obliterates nasty hospital odors and aromatherapy is good for us all.

15. Mom's teddy bears – She has a collection and for an extended stay I bring in a couple of them. They make her laugh and I think they are a bit comforting too. Any familiar item from home can be helpful.
16. Portable CD player – For extended hospital stays when I don't have enough tunes on my iPad to last.
17. Flowers – They really do brighten the room as well as our spirits. Intensive care or certain hospital units will not always allow live flowers, but will often OK silk flowers.
18. Pictures – I bring tape, beautiful nature pictures, and copies of family photos. I tape them on walls or mirrors along with get well cards. Easy to take down when we get to go home. When Mom fractured her spine and couldn't stand on her own, I posted photos of her standing tall and strong as inspiration while she recovered from surgery.
19. Insist on a cot or a room with built-in couch/bed – If you end up spending the night with your loved one you may not sleep much but when you do you'll sleep much better. I usually have to ask as they are rarely offered but always materialize when asked for.
20. Dark chocolate – Lots of it!!!

Here's hoping your next trip to the hospital will be a bit more safe, calm and healing.

*You viewed this article on the Caregivers Nova Scotia website www.CaregiversNS.org.
For more information, contact us toll-free at 1.877.488.7338.