

5 TIPS for caregivers

AVOIDING RE-HOSPITALIZATION

As much as you may try to avoid it, for many of us caring for a loved one with dementia hospitalization happens. Sometimes it is planned, sometimes unplanned, but it's always stressful. But did you know that nearly 1 in 5 seniors who are hospitalized return to the hospital within 30 days? This just adds more stress! Hospital readmissions can be avoidable when you are confident in your loved one's discharge plan the first time around. Make sure that you can confidently make these 5 statements before leaving the hospital to help your loved one avoid another stay.

1 I have a plan for follow-up care.

Most of us are just ready to get home from the hospital as soon as possible so we can be at home and feel better. An important part of feeling better is often follow-up visits – with your primary care physician, or perhaps a physical therapist, another specialist, or even an in-home nurse or healthcare provider. Make sure that after your hospital stay, you know who your loved one needs to see and how soon. And confirm if you need to schedule these appointments, or if a doctor or discharge planner have already set something up. When the time comes for the follow-up, even if they're feeling dramatically better, still go to these appointments! It's important for your doctors to gauge how you're doing and ensure that treatment is working as planned.

2 I will communicate any changes.

It's important that everyone involved in the care of your loved one is updated on the hospital stay, and if there are any important changes. Your follow-up visits may notify your primary care physician or other specialists they regularly see. (If they don't have a follow-up visit—then do make sure they're aware!) But also make sure that “informal” caregivers are aware of any changes as well. Family and friends don't have to know all the nitty gritty details of the hospital stay, but make sure they know if there are important changes. This could include anything from a new medication that makes them drowsy, or what red-flags to look for to prevent a future hospitalization.

3 I know the red-flags.

That being said, before you can tell others about red-flags to look for, you need to make sure you know them yourself! Make sure you understand what is “normal” for their recovery. We know that normal isn't always “normal” for everyone, but understand if your loved one might experience pain or swelling post-surgery, but know to call if there's still pain after a week. Be aware if there are drug interactions or side-effects to take note of that would be a separate issue from the recovery. If you do see any unusual

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signs or symptoms, you also need to know who to call. Know what issues are relatively minor that might warrant a call to the doctor, versus what might be a sign of a serious complication that requires the emergency room. This is especially important when caring for someone in the later stages of dementia, who may not be able to communicate pain or discomfort easily.

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4 I understand my loved one's medications.

Many of our loved ones take a number of medications, whether for dementia or another health condition, and it can be enough effort to keep up with the status quo. However, after a hospital stay, it is likely that medications may change, be added or discontinued, or could temporarily include pain management or other follow-up treatments. Be sure you understand these changes! If any new medications are added, make sure you talk to the doctor or pharmacist about any potential interactions with current medications. If any dosages are changed, make sure you understand when and how the medications should now be given. Take notes if you need to! And make sure you fill any new prescriptions in a timely fashion too.

It may sound silly, but if you're not in the medical field, it can be easy to confuse a doctor's instructions. Is that new medication prescribed really just the generic name for something they're already taking? (You don't want to accidentally give double!). If the doctor says partial bed rest, what does partial really mean? A certain amount of time? No stairs? Be sure that you don't just know the answers, but what the answers actually mean. This not only ensures the best care for your loved one, but hopefully prevents a return trip back to the hospital!

5 I've asked all my questions.

Finally, the most important piece of it all is to ask questions, and most importantly, make sure you understand the answers! When you're in the hospital, your loved one's care is fully provided by the doctors and nurses on staff. However, once you get home, you're in charge! You need to make sure you fully understand the care that needs to be provided. You've already asked questions about medications, follow-up care, and red-flags to look for. Is there anything that is still unclear? Or an issue specific to their situation? And again, did you understand the answers to all the questions?



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