

Getting Home Safely

A Hospital Discharge Guide
for Older Adults & their
Families



There are some medical problems that need to be treated in the hospital. However, there are risks to being in the hospital. Once your treatment is done, it is important to go home as soon as it is possible.

The goal of this guide is to help you and your family participate in planning your discharge home and to make your transition from hospital a safe one. While it is not possible to think of every question or problem you might run into after being in hospital, we hope that this guide will help you talk with your health team about what will be needed for your care.

This guide is based on the knowledge and the experience of patients, families and health care professionals.

Preparing for Discharge



Hospital care is best provided by a team of health professionals. On many wards the team includes dietitians, discharge planners, nurses, occupational therapists, pharmacists, physicians, physiotherapists, and social workers. Different team members may play a role in planning your discharge home.

When will I be discharged?

It is important to know when the team feels that you will be ready to go home so you can be involved in planning and decisions. Your thoughts and ideas about the discharge date and the plans for safe discharge are important. If you feel that you have not received enough information or if there is something you don't understand, ask questions! Keep a pen and a notepad by your bed and write down questions you want to ask and make notes of what you have been told.

If you have a family member or close friend who is helping you discuss and plan your transition home with the health team, make sure the team is aware so that this person can be there to support you.

Here are some questions you might ask to start the discussion of the transition home:

- Why was I in hospital?
- What are my main health concerns?
- What do I need to do to manage my health at home?
- What may happen if I don't do these things?
- Is there anything I need to learn to do to follow the recommendations made by the team?
- What supports or service will I need?

Will I have difficulties with mobility and with independence at home?

Be sure the team planning your discharge knows how mobile and independent you are and considers difficulties you may have once home. Here are some example questions you can ask:

- Do I need help to get up out of bed or chair safely?
- Can I go up and down the stairs safely?
- Do I need to use a walker or cane?
- Do I need help using the toilet?
- Should I have help with bathing and dressing?
- Do I need special equipment such as grab bars or bath chairs?
- Will I need help to prepare meals?





How can I ensure that I take my medications safely?

It is very important that you understand what medications to take and how to take them. This is especially true if you are prescribed new medications. You should always ask staff for a list of all the medications you are supposed to take at home. Here are some examples of other questions you might ask:

- Which medications have been stopped since being in the hospital?
- Have any of the doses of my previous medications been changed?
- What new medications have been prescribed during this admission?
- What are these new medications for? How do I take these new medications?
- Should I take the pills I had at home or use a new prescription from the hospital doctor?
- What is the best way to organize my medications? Do I need help from family or caregivers to take my pills?

If you are on a blood thinner called Coumadin it is important to know how soon to get the blood test (called the INR) to check the thinness of the blood once you are home.

Hospital stay is a good time to stop smoking and to decrease alcohol intake. Please talk to the hospital doctors if this is a concern.

What should I eat when I return home?

Diet and food changes are also common sources of confusion after discharge. Dietary changes might include foods your medical team says you should avoid or changes to the texture of foods or liquids.

How active should I be when I return home?

The best way to stay independent is to keep as active as possible. Set goals for yourself and take an active role in your own care. Here are some example questions:

- How much activity should I be doing at first?
- When should I return to my normal amount of activity?
- Are there specific activity restrictions that I should follow?
- Is it safe for me to walk without help at home and outside?
- Is it safe for me to be left alone at home?



What information should I get before going home?

Here are some examples of questions to ask:

- Are there any information sheets about my health condition?
- Does the team provide a copy of the Discharge Summary so I can have a record of what happened in the hospital?
- What home care services have been arranged for me and are there contact telephone numbers for these services? When will the services start?
- Have I been referred to any specialists? If so; who, why and when?

It is a good idea to summarize the discharge plans to a staff member using your own words. This will help you be sure you understand the plans.

Will my family physician get information about my hospital stay?

The hospital physicians will send a summary of your hospital stay to your family physician (primary care provider). If you have changed primary care provider it is wise to let the hospital team know this. If you do not have a primary care provider, you may ask for a summary that you could use if you need to be seen at a walk-in clinic or emergency department.



If I have problems once I am home, who should I call?

Be sure to know who can answer questions and deal with health problems that may come up in the first few days after you leave the hospital. Here are some questions you could ask:

- Who can I call from the hospital team if I have medical questions?
- When should I see my family physician? Are there specific things I should discuss with them?
- Are there any test results that I have not yet received at discharge?
- What should I watch out for once I am home?

Are there situations when I should consult a physician right away?

YES ... you should consult a physician right away IF:

- You develop diarrhea after your hospital stay (it may be caused by bacteria called C. difficile and needs to be treated right away).
- There is a big change in your ability to move around your home safely.
- You are not able to eat or drink.
- There has been a big decrease in your alertness, memory or thinking.
- You are unable to take your medications.

Is driving a car a good idea when I get home?

Sometimes a medical condition may affect the ability to drive safely. If your physician has concerns about your ability to drive for medical reasons, in some provinces they must report this to the Ministry of Transportation. If there are no specific concerns, it is wise to return to driving only when you are feeling better and stronger. Ask your physicians and other team members what they advise about driving. Once home, your family physician or an occupational therapist may be able to advise you on driving safety.



This checklist may help remind you or your caregiver of important pieces in the puzzle of getting home safely.

Things I Need To Know Or Do To Ensure A Safe Transition Home	
I know why I was in hospital.	
I know when I am going home.	
I know how to make my home ready for my return home.	
I have a list of my medication, with dosages.	
I know when and how to take my medication.	
I know what type of help I need to take my medication correctly.	
I know what to eat and what not to eat.	
I know how to make the food consistencies that have been recommended (e.g., thickened liquids, minced, etc.).	
I know what activity level is right for me.	
I know what type of help I need with walking around the house, on stairs, and outside.	
I have the right aid for mobility (e.g., walker, cane, etc.).	
I know what type of help I need in the kitchen to make meals safely.	
I know what type of help I need with bathing and going to the toilet, and who can help me.	

I have the right equipment for bathing and toileting.	
I know what care services I will get, when they will start, and their contact numbers.	
I know what appointments with specialists have been booked for me and I have their contact numbers.	
I know what outpatient services I need to attend.	
I know when to follow-up with my family doctor.	
I know who to call at the hospital (including their phone numbers) if I have concerns after going home.	
I know symptoms I should watch for and when I should contact a physician right away.	



CIHR IRSC

Canadian Institutes of Health Research
 Instituts de recherche en santé du Canada

The development of this “Getting Home Safely” guide was supported by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research
www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca



NOTES: