



Tips for Getting Home Safely from the Hospital -- and Staying Home

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It's such a relief to get a family member home from the hospital that many of us don't realize how crucial the next few weeks are in making sure the patient stays home and gets healthy. Hospitals don't always help the situation by giving out confusing and cryptic discharge instructions.

For this especially vulnerable time, patients and their family caregivers need to be very clear -- before leaving the hospital -- on the following key areas:

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1. Is professional therapy needed? Physical therapy, occupational therapy, wound care and other types of care can sometimes be managed at home, as long as you have a caregiver willing to come to the house. If not, the patient may need to go to a transitional place first: a nursing home or rehab facility.
2. When is the next doctor appointment and who with? Don't leave the hospital without a specific appointment with the patient's primary care doctor. The hospital should help set up this appointment. The sooner after discharge this visit happens, the better the patient's odds of avoiding a readmission to the hospital.
3. What medicines need to be taken, and when? Insist on a specific list that takes into account whatever the patient was taking before the hospital stay and also whatever they need now.
4. Who do we call with any problems? The hospital's discharge instructions need to list a contact name and number, and also should say the types of problems that are worth a call.
5. What else do we need to do? If a family member is expected to give care -- like changing a dressing or helping the patient to walk -- make sure those instructions are precise and in writing.

The bottom line on all the above is that family members, especially when it involves an elderly patient, need to be very very clear on everything they need to know and do.

Here is a downloadable [model form](#) of a written discharge instruction sheet. This is from the Society of Hospital Medicine, a group of doctors who specialize in hospital care. Patients and families can use this template to make sure there are no gaps in what they need to know for a successful transition home.

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