

Guide to

# Health Care Quality

How to know it when you see it



Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

Advancing Excellence in Health Care • [www.ahrq.gov](http://www.ahrq.gov)

## Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

This booklet was developed by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. AHRQ works to improve health care quality, prevent medical errors, and assess what happens to people as a result of the care they receive.

AHRQ publishes two annual reports on the quality of health care in the United States. The *National Healthcare Quality Report* and the *National Healthcare Disparities Report*.

To obtain free copies of these reports or additional copies of this booklet, call the AHRQ Publications Clearinghouse at 1-800-358-9295 or send an e-mail to [ahrqpubs@ahrq.gov](mailto:ahrqpubs@ahrq.gov).

***Care about your health.  
Help make the decisions.***



## Purpose of this Booklet

The purpose of this booklet is to help you get quality health care. Getting quality health care can help you stay healthy and recover faster when you become sick. Throughout the booklet, tips are provided to help you be active in making decisions about your health care. The goal is to make sure you receive the best possible care.

## You Deserve Quality Health Care

Getting quality health care can help you stay healthy and recover faster when you become sick. However, we know that often, people do not get high-quality care. A 2004 study of 12 large U.S. communities found that just over half (54.9 percent) of people were receiving the care they needed.

What exactly is health care quality? We know that quality means different things to different people. Some people think that getting quality health care means seeing the doctor right away, being treated courteously by the doctor's staff, or having the doctor spend a lot of time with them.

While these things are important to all of us, clinical quality of care is even more important. Think of it like this: getting quality health care is like taking your car to a mechanic. The people in the shop can be friendly and listen to your complaints, but the most important thing is whether they fix the problem with your car.

Health care providers, the government, and many other groups are working hard to improve health care quality. You also have a role to play to make sure you and your family members receive the best quality care possible.

## Be Active: Take Charge of Your Health Care

The single, most important thing you can do to ensure you get high-quality health care is to find and use health information and take an active role in making decisions about your care. Here are some steps you can take to improve your care:

- Work together with your doctor and other members of the health care team to make decisions about your care.
- Be sure to ask questions. Examples of questions to ask your doctor begin on this page.
- Ask your doctor what the scientific evidence has to say about your condition.
- Do your homework; go online or to the library to find out more information about your condition.
- Find and use quality information in making health care choices. Be sure the information comes from a reliable source.

## Talking with Your Doctor

Here are some examples of questions to ask your doctor. It is not a complete list. You will probably have many other questions. You should keep asking questions until you understand what is wrong with you and what you need to do to get better.

### **Understand your diagnosis:**

- What is wrong with me?
- What do I need to do to get better?
- Where can I get more information about my condition?

### **If you need a lab test, an x-ray, or another kind of test, ask your doctor:**

- How will the test be done?
- How accurate will the results be?
- What are the benefits and risks of the test?
- When and how will I receive the results?
- What should I do if I don't receive the results?

**If you receive a prescription for a new medicine:**

- What is the name of the medicine?
- What is it supposed to do?
- When should I take the medicine, and how much should I take?
- Does the medicine have any side effects?

**If you need surgery:**

- What kind of operation do I need?
- Why do I need an operation?
- What are the benefits and risks of the operation?
- How long will it take to recover?
- What will happen if I don't have the operation?
- Are there any other treatments I could have instead of an operation?
- Where can I get a second opinion?

## **Understanding Health Care Quality**

Research has shown that science-based measures can be used to assess quality for various conditions and for specific types of care. For example, quality health care is:

- Doing the right thing (getting the health care services you need).
- At the right time (when you need them).
- In the right way (using the appropriate test or procedure).
- To achieve the best possible results.

Providing quality health care also means striking the right balance of services by:

- Avoiding underuse (for example, not screening a person for high blood pressure).
- Avoiding overuse (for example, performing tests that a patient doesn't need).
- Eliminating misuse (for example, providing medications that may have dangerous interactions).

We would like to think that every doctor, nurse, pharmacist, hospital, and other provider gives high-quality care, but we know this is not always the case. Quality varies depending on where you live. Quality can vary from one State to another, and it can vary from one doctor's office across the street to another. Health care quality varies widely and for many reasons.

For example, timely receipt of clot-busting drugs can save lives for patients suffering heart attacks. The national standard for providing clot-busting drugs is within 30 minutes of a patient's arrival at the hospital. But we know that this varies widely across States, from a low of 20 minutes in one State to a high of 140 minutes in another.

## Efforts to Improve Health Care Quality

Improving health care quality is a team effort, and it is ongoing on many levels. To succeed, every part of the health care system must become involved, including government and nongovernment organizations, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, hospitals, other providers, and you, the patient.

### **Sarah's story**

Sarah can tell you a story about the importance of getting good quality health care. Last year, she decided to have elective surgery to repair a hernia. She visited the surgeon in his office before the operation and was very pleased with his bedside manner and friendly staff. Sarah put herself in the doctor's hands and didn't ask many questions.

Although Sarah's operation went smoothly, she soon developed a high fever from an infection. The doctor said she would have to stay in the hospital a few extra days. That's when things began to go wrong. When she really needed them, the nurses were slow to respond to her calls, her doctor didn't always stop in to see her during his hospital rounds, and she sometimes didn't get her pain medicine on time.

Fortunately, Sarah's infection finally cleared up, and she was sent home to recuperate from her surgery. Sarah is fine now, but this story could have had a very different ending. If you need surgery, be sure to ask your doctor about the risks and benefits of the operation. You will find examples of questions to ask your doctor on page 2 of this booklet.

One way to assess and track quality of care is by using measures that are based on the latest scientific evidence. A health care measure clearly defines which health care services should be provided to patients who have or are at risk for certain conditions. Measures also set standards for screening, immunizations, and other preventive care.

There are two types of measures: clinical measures and consumer ratings. See the back of this booklet for more information about health care quality measures.

Because measures are intended to set general standards for a broad population, they may or may not apply to you. Always check with your doctor about your level of risk for a particular condition and which types of screening and tests you should have.

## Clinical Measures

Clinical measures can be used to assess quality of care and patient satisfaction. Examples are provided here of measures that can be used to assess care quality for three of the most common conditions: diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.



### Diabetes

More than 6 percent of all Americans have diabetes. Diabetes is the leading cause of blindness, leg amputation not resulting from trauma, and kidney disease. Diabetes increases the risk of complications in pregnant women, and it is a risk factor for heart disease and stroke. People who have diabetes are two to four times as likely to die from heart disease or stroke as those without diabetes.

The following five measures can be used to assess quality of care for diabetes. If you have diabetes, you should receive the following tests and exams:

- Regular hemoglobin A1c (blood glucose) testing.
- Regular cholesterol testing.
- Annual retinal eye exam.
- Annual foot exam.
- Flu shot each year.

## Heart Disease

Heart disease—or cardiovascular disease—is a collection of diseases of the heart and blood vessels that includes heart attack, stroke, and heart failure. About 64 million Americans are living with heart disease.

Heart disease is the number one cause of death in the United States. Maintaining control of blood pressure and cholesterol can help you prevent heart attack and stroke.

The following are examples of measures that can be used to assess care for heart disease.

For adults age 18 and older:

- Blood pressure measurement.
- Cholesterol testing.

### John's story

John awoke from a restless night's sleep with a feeling of tightness in his chest and pain down his left arm. John was having a heart attack. His wife called 911, and he was taken to the emergency room via ambulance.

The ER doctors took very good care of John. He was given an aspirin almost as soon as he arrived at the hospital. Fortunately, John's heart attack was mild. After undergoing some special tests, his heart surgeon implanted a stent to prop open his partially clogged artery.

As John was being discharged from the hospital, his doctor prescribed beta-blocker therapy to reduce the risk that he would have another heart attack. John was advised to have his blood pressure and cholesterol checked regularly. John got the right care for his heart attack.

More than 60 million men and women are living with heart disease. Everyone should know what constitutes good quality care for heart disease.

In general:

- If you smoke, being advised to stop smoking.
- If you suffer a heart attack, receiving aspirin within 24 hours of hospital admission and being prescribed beta-blocker therapy at hospital discharge.

## Cancer

Cancer is the Nation's second leading cause of death, after heart disease. Each year, more than 1 million new cases of cancer are diagnosed. Four cancers account for over half of the new cases reported each year. The four cancers are: lung, colorectal, breast, and prostate.

Screening to permit early detection holds the most promise for successful cancer treatment.

**Talk to your doctor about screening tests for all of these cancers, especially if other members of your family have had these cancers or if you smoke.**

The following are examples of quality measures for several types of cancer screening.

### **Breast and cervical cancer:**

- Mammography exam for women age 40 and older.
- Pap smear testing for women age 18 and older.

**Colorectal cancer:** Men and women age 50 and older should receive the following tests:

### **Jean's story**

Jean was 45 when she went to her doctor for a checkup 5 years ago. Her doctor performed a clinical breast exam and found nothing remarkable. Jean was given a referral to a nearby x-ray facility to have a mammogram.

A week or so later, Jean received a phone call from her doctor's office asking her to come in to go over the results. The mammogram showed a small lump in Jean's right breast. Her doctor referred her to a breast surgeon for a biopsy. The biopsy revealed early-stage breast cancer. Jean had a lumpectomy and followup radiation.

Today, Jean is cancer-free and looking forward to the birth of her first grandchild. Getting the right care—a mammogram—at the right time—over 40 years of age—saved Jean's life. For Jean, getting quality health care gave her a new lease on life.

- Fecal occult blood testing (a test to detect blood in the stool).
- Flexible sigmoidoscopy/colonoscopy exam. Check with your doctor about how often you should have this screening.



## Finding Quality Information

Today, you can find a great deal of information about health care quality, both online and in print. New tools and resources for assessing and improving health care quality are being developed and will be available soon. Meanwhile, here is a brief look at what is available now. More resources are listed at the back of this booklet.

## Report Cards

Reports cards and other quality reports include consumer ratings, clinical performance measures, or both. They can help you select the right treatment and the right health care provider based on what is most important to you. You may be able to get quality reports from:

- **Your employer:** Ask your personnel office for information on health plans.
- **Health plans:** Ask the plan's customer service office about quality reports.
- **Other health care providers:** Hospitals, nursing homes, and community health clinics may have quality reports.

Several government agencies publish quality reports and other types of quality information.

- For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a quality tool that helps you compare the care

provided by hospitals in your area. This tool is available online at [www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov](http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov).

- Another Web site ([www.medicare.gov/NHCompare/home.asp](http://www.medicare.gov/NHCompare/home.asp)) provided by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has detailed information on the past performance of every Medicare and Medicaid certified nursing home in the country.

## Accreditation

Accreditation is another indicator that can be used to judge quality. Accreditation is a “seal of approval” given by a private, independent group. Health care organizations—such as hospitals—must meet national standards, including clinical performance measures, in order to be accredited. Several organizations that award accreditation are listed at the back of this booklet.

Accreditation reports present quality information on hospitals, nursing homes, and other health care facilities. For example, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) prepares a performance report on each hospital that it surveys.

Another group, the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA), rates health plans like HMOs. NCQA’s Health Plan Report Card presents accreditation results for hundreds of health plans across the country.

Web addresses and basic information on JCAHO, NCQA, and other organizations can be found at the back of this booklet.

If you need help in finding quality reports, accreditation reports, or other types of quality information, check with your local library or your local or State health department. You can find your State health department listed in the blue pages of your phone book.

## Consumer Ratings

Consumer ratings tell you what other people like you think about their health care. Some consumer ratings focus on health plans. For example, a survey called CAHPS® asks people about the quality of care in their own health plans. Their answers can help you decide whether you want to join one of those plans.

Hospital CAHPS (HCAHPS®) will be released for the first time in 2006. It will ask patients about their experiences with hospital care.



## Choosing Quality Health Care

Here are some tips for making quality a key factor in the health care decisions you make about health plans, doctors, treatments, hospitals, and long-term care. At the end of this booklet you will find a list of resources where you can get answers to these questions.

### **Look for a health plan that:**

- Has been given high ratings by its members on the things that are important to you.
- Has the doctors and hospitals you want or need.
- Provides the benefits (covered services) you need.
- Provides services where and when you need them.
- Has a documented history of doing a good job of preventing and treating illness.

### **Look for a doctor who:**

- Has received high ratings for quality of care.
- Has the training and experience to meet your needs.
- Will work with you to make decisions about your health care.

### **If you become ill, make sure you understand:**

- Your diagnosis.
- How soon you need to be treated.
- Your treatment choices, including the benefits and risks of each treatment.

- How much experience your doctor has in treating your condition.

**Look for a hospital that:**

- Is accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO).
- Is rated highly by the State and by consumer groups or other organizations.
- Has a lot of experience and success in treating your condition.
- Monitors quality of care and works to improve quality.

**In choosing a nursing home or other long-term care facility, look for one that:**

- Has been found by State agencies and other groups to provide quality care.
- Provides a level of care, including staff and services, that will meet your needs.



## **Moving Forward with Quality Improvement**

*The National Healthcare Quality Report* and the *National Healthcare Disparities Report* present important information about the state of health care in America. These reports indicate that:

- Quality is improving in many areas, but change takes time.
  - The gap between the best possible care and actual care remains large.
- Quality of care varies widely across the country.
  - Continuing improvement in health care is possible.

People like you have an important role to play in health care quality improvement. You can use the measures described in this booklet as a yardstick to assess the quality of care provided to you and your family members.

In addition, many public and private groups are working to improve health care quality measures and other quality tools. The goal is to make these measures and tools reliable, uniform, and helpful to consumers and patients in making health care choices. See the resource list that follows to find out how you can get more information about health care quality and what you can do to ensure you get the best quality care possible.



## Resources for More Information

If you have access to a computer and the Internet, you can find information on every health topic. If you don't have a computer, check with your local library. Most libraries have computers you can use and staff who can help you learn to search the Internet. Phone numbers are provided where available.

### Resources for More Information

[www.ahrq.gov](http://www.ahrq.gov) – sponsored by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Click on “Consumers & Patients” to find information and resources on quality of care, medical errors and patient safety, various clinical conditions, prevention and wellness, prescription medicines, smoking cessation, choosing a health plan, and many other topics. Call the AHRQ Publications Clearinghouse at 1-800-358-9295.

[www.guideline.gov](http://www.guideline.gov) – sponsored by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Click on “Patient Resources” for links to many Web sites that feature science-based health information.

[www.qualitytools.ahrq.gov](http://www.qualitytools.ahrq.gov) – sponsored by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. QualityTools is a clearinghouse of practical, ready-to-use tools for measuring and improving the quality of health care. Information is provided for patients and consumers, health care providers, policymakers, and payers and purchasers.

[www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov) – sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the government’s primary source for conducting and funding clinical research. This is the main NIH Web site through which you can access information on many health topics and link to the various Institutes that make up NIH. These include the National Cancer Institute, the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, and many others. Click on “Institutes” or search the Web site for your topic.

<http://clinicaltrials.gov> – sponsored by the National Institutes of Health provides regularly updated information about federally and privately supported research in human subjects. You can browse the site or enter a specific location, condition, or other search topic.

[www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov) – sponsored by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services can help you compare hospitals and nursing homes in your area. Phone 1-800-MEDICARE.

[www.healthfinder.gov](http://www.healthfinder.gov) -- sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It offers links to hundreds of sites on the Internet that contain reliable health care information. Click on “Health Care” and then “Health Care Quality” for links to many government and nongovernment sources of information on health care quality.

[www.jcaho.org](http://www.jcaho.org) – sponsored by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations. Click on “Quality Check” to locate JCAHO accredited hospitals, assisted living

facilities, laboratories, and other types of health care facilities and services in your area. Phone 1-630-792-5000.

[www.ncqa.org](http://www.ncqa.org) – sponsored by the National Committee for Quality Assurance. Click on “Report Cards” to access a variety of health care quality information, including reports on health care quality, report cards for physicians and health plans, and more. Phone 1-888-275-7585.

[www.ahqa.org](http://www.ahqa.org) – sponsored by the American Health Quality Association (AHQA). AHQA represents the national network of Quality Improvement Organizations (QIOs) that help physicians, hospitals, health plans, nursing homes, and home health agencies improve the quality of care they deliver. QIOs focus on the adoption of best practices to provide safe, effective and patient-centered care. Go to [www.ahqa.org/pub/189\\_1085\\_5234.cfm](http://www.ahqa.org/pub/189_1085_5234.cfm) to locate a QIO near you or find out more about health care quality.

[www.nahc.org](http://www.nahc.org) – sponsored by the National Association for Home Care and Hospice. Click on “consumers” to locate home care, hospice services, and other resources in your State. Phone 1-202-547-7424.

[www.aaahc.org](http://www.aaahc.org) – sponsored by the Accreditation Association for Ambulatory Health Care. Click on “Search for Accredited Organizations” to locate outpatient health care services, such as freestanding surgery centers, radiology facilities, podiatrists, pain management clinics, and many other types of outpatient facilities accredited by the Association. Phone 1-847-853-6060.

[www.ama-assn.org](http://www.ama-assn.org) – sponsored by the American Medical Association. Click on “For Patients” to access “DoctorFinder” with information about virtually every licensed physician in the United States, as well as links to other helpful Web sites. Phone 1-800-621-8335.

[www.docboard.org](http://www.docboard.org) – sponsored by the National Organization for State Medical and Osteopathic Board Executive Directors. Click on “DocFinder” to access the physician database, which contains information from State government licensing boards on the licensing background and disciplinary information of physicians and other health care providers.

[www.fsmb.org](http://www.fsmb.org) – sponsored by the Federation of State Medical Boards. The Federation collects information on disciplinary actions taken against physicians by regulatory and licensing agencies, such as State medical boards, the National Board of Medical Examiners, various Federal agencies, and other licensing authorities. Click on “Public Access” to search the Web site to learn if your physician has any disciplinary history. Phone 1-817-868-4000.

[www.ahip.org](http://www.ahip.org) – sponsored by America’s Health Insurance Plans. Click on “Consumer Information” to access guides on health insurance coverage and links to many other sources of information about choosing a health insurance plan. Phone 1-202-778-3200.

[www.naic.org](http://www.naic.org) – sponsored by the National Association of Insurance Commissioners. Click on “Consumer Information Source” and then “Health Insurance” to access information about different types of health insurance, your rights as a consumer, consumer fact sheets, and other information. Phone 1-816-842-3600.

### **State and Local Organizations**

**State and local agencies** – Check the blue pages of your phone book to find the State and local health departments in your area.

**Local chapters of national organizations** – Check the white pages of your phone book to find State and local chapters of national organizations, such as the American Cancer Society and the American Diabetes Association. Organizations like these often can refer you to self-help and support groups and other resources in your community.



## Using Measures to Evaluate Care

Health care measures help us to determine whether services are being provided appropriately and at the right time.

For example, we know that:

- It is important to check whether a person's blood pressure is high because high blood pressure can lead to heart disease.
- A patient who is admitted to the hospital with a heart attack should be given aspirin and a beta-blocker.

Clinical performance measures and consumer ratings are the two main types of quality measures. These measures are used to check up on and improve the quality of health care provided by doctors, hospitals, and other providers, including nursing homes, community clinics, and health plans.

Most of the measures described in this booklet are drawn from the *National Healthcare Quality Report*, which is prepared annually by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. See the inside front cover of this booklet to find out more about the quality report and a companion report, the *National Healthcare Disparities Report*.

## Other Quality Improvement Efforts

In addition to the quality measures and other tools discussed in this booklet and used in the *National Healthcare Quality Report*, many other government and private organizations have developed measures and tools for assessing health care quality. These include report cards, consumer ratings, and accreditation reports. See pages 12-15 of this booklet for a list of resources on quality assessment and improvement.

**U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services**

Agency for Healthcare  
Research and Quality  
Rockville, MD

[www.ahrq.gov](http://www.ahrq.gov)



Publication No. 05-0088  
September 2005