

# *Healthcare Communication Review*

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## **Preparing For Surgery and Recovery**

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Having made all the “who, what, when and where” choices about surgery, the questions become: how can you best prepare for the experience of surgery and what can you do to make recovery as smooth as possible? Fortunately, much of what you can do here is simple, though not necessarily easy. Examples follow.

### **Preparing for Surgery**

The first thing you can do is to try to make sure that, going into the surgery, you are as healthy as you can be. Yes, even though you are having surgery because of some physical problem, you can sometimes improve your odds by improving your health in other areas. For instance, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists states that the lungs of smokers who stop smoking before surgery, for any period of time, will be in better shape before the operation, will better handle the anesthesia and, after the surgery, will more easily return to normal function.<sup>1</sup>

Because there are often steps you can take to improve your health, and therefore your odds, it's important to talk with your doctors (surgeons, anesthesiologists, primary care doctors) to find out what these steps might be – whether it's modifying your medications, dietary supplements, food intake or anything else. Some surgeons even require that patients have a pre-surgical checkup by their primary care doctors – just to make sure that all other systems are a “go”.

Second, there are things you can do to relieve any stress you may be feeling as you await your surgery. This is important to deal with because of a well-established connection between the mind and the body. While you may have experienced instances where physical problems have led to emotional stress, it's important to remember that it goes the other way as well. The effect of type “A” personalities on heart health, for instance, is a commonly reported phenomenon.

How can you deal with stress? One way is to tackle its causes. One possible cause, fear of the unknown, can be relieved by asking your doctors to explain exactly what will happen – leading up to, during, and after the surgery. If you want to go beyond speaking with your doctors, and have access to the Internet, visit <http://www.medlineplus.gov/> and check out their interactive tutorials. They may have one describing your specific surgery but even if they don't, they have one on preparing for surgery. Dealing with practical matters, such as getting all the preliminary tests out of the way or arranging for time-off at work or child-care, can also help. What's important is that you let your needs and concerns guide you. If you're concerned about blood transfusions from strangers, then

you can deal with it by donating your own blood before surgery. If you find comfort in the company of certain people or in certain places, then seek out those people and places.

You can also take steps to prevent wrong site surgeries. In this regard, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations ([JCAHO](http://www.jcaho.org)) suggests that the surgical site be clearly marked with a permanent marker.<sup>2</sup> Speak with your doctor to see how best to do this.

### **Preparing for Recovery**

It's no secret that our healthcare system is ailing. Hospitals, for instance, have long been suffering the harsh pinch of state and federal budget cuts and a decrease in the pool of nurses (RNs) to hire. Another problem, sad to say, is that medical errors do occur in hospitals and during surgery. In "To Err is Human", a 1999 [report](#) by the [Institute of Medicine](#) (IOM), it was estimated that perhaps, as many as 98,000 deaths a year are a result of such errors. This has spurred hospitals to establish systems to increase patient safety. Even so, [findings](#) of another study, reported in 2004, suggest that the number of patient deaths from medical errors may be as much as double the IOM's figures.<sup>3</sup>

While hospitals and professionals have been establishing safety systems and striven to provide the best of care, there are things *you* can do to help your recovery: take steps to prevent medical errors and to create a healing environment (see [Review](#)). How? Understand that it is especially important for patients, with the help of family and friends, to actively monitor their care while in the hospital. This means that it may be best to have someone there with you, around the clock if necessary.

If either you or your friends feel intimidated by the idea of "keeping an eye on things", you can find assistance at <http://www.carepointers.com/>. This site provides a great deal of practical information on how family or friends can offer comfort and support while monitoring care and safety. If you don't want, or don't have, someone who can stay with you, you can call upon the assistance of patient representatives, employed by many hospitals to advocate for patients on a wide range of matters. In either case, one important element of preparing for your recovery is to ask people to be on your recovery team.□

<sup>1</sup> Enter *Preparing for Surgery* in search box at <http://www.medem.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Call 1-877-223-6866 or see "Preventing Wrong Site Surgery" at [www.jcaho.org](http://www.jcaho.org)

<sup>3</sup> Visit [www.healthfinder.gov](http://www.healthfinder.gov) and enter search terms *medical errors*

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