Top 10 tips to get out of the hospital alive

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While doctors and hospitals across the country pursue various ways to treat the epidemic of medical errors, many experts believe the best prescription is vigilance by patients

and their families. In observance of National Patient Safety Day, which is today, we have compiled a list of the "Top 10 Tips to Get Out of the Hospital Alive."

1. Educate yourself. Although the malpractice records of individual health-care providers are often kept secret, you can check out doctors and hospitals through the

Pennsylvania State Board of Medicine; the fee-based HealthGrades (www.healthgrades.com); the Leapfrog Group (www.leapfroggroup.org); and the U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services (www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov). Also, ask your friends (especially lawyers, if you know any), family, co-workers, and neighbors.

2. Educate your doctor. Make sure your doctor knows about your medical history, blood type and any allergies, pre-existing conditions or adverse reactions to medications.

Bring a list of all medications and supplements you take.

3. Ask a lot of questions. Use the Internet to find out as much as possible about your condition and treatments options.

4. Take an advocate with you. Ask a family member or friend to accompany you during your hospital stay.

5. Take notes or bring a tape recorder, so you can remember what your doctors told you. If you are expecting a doctor visit, make a list of questions you want to ask.

6. Double-check all your medications before accepting them. Medication errors are the most common kind of hospital error. Each time someone brings you medication, ask:

What is this medicine for? Who prescribed it? When am I supposed to take it? How am I supposed to take it? What are the side effects? Is it safe to take with other medications or food?

7. Be friendly, but not too friendly. Save the chitchat until after the staff has administered medications or checked your vitals. Even little interruptions can be distracting

enough to cause a slipup.

8. Wash hands. Hospital-borne infections are a major problem, even in the best facilities. Ask doctors, nurses and hospital staff to wash their hands before touching you or

anything you will be touching. After you use the bathroom, wash your hands. Simple hand washing can save you from contracting a deadly infection during your hospital stay.

9. Avoid wrong-site surgery.

This has become such a serious problem that Medicare, many private insurers and the state of Pennsylvania have begun refusing to pay for wrong-site surgeries. Prior to

any operation, surgeons should sign or mark the body part to be operated on, and the hospital should have a procedure for verifying the surgical site before the operation

begins. Ask your advocate to verify that the surgeon and operating room staff know the correct site.

10. Follow up. Ask when your test results will be available and follow up if your doctor or nurse doesn't call. Also, don't leave the hospital without fully understanding all posttreatment

instructions, including what medication to take, proper dosages, when to schedule follow-up appointments and when you can return to normal activities.

Remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

David I. Fallk, Esq., is a Scranton attorney and president of The Committee for Justice for All in Kingston.