

Caregiver's CORNER

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Sometimes our role as caregivers happens gradually when our parent or spouse ages, or a disease progresses. Sometimes it happens suddenly when there is a stroke, accident, or other health crisis. Wouldn't it be nice if, when it did happen, we had a "how-to" manual with all of the answers to our questions?

If you are a caregiver you know that this is one of the most challenging roles you will ever face. Along with all of the responsibilities you now have, you may also need to be the voice for your loved one when it comes to asking questions of medical personnel and finding needed information. Medications, medical tests and procedures, Medicare and Medicaid questions, insurance forms, transportation needs and many other areas require daily decisions.

Making big medical decisions is overwhelming. It is critical that seniors and people with chronic conditions have a caregiver as an advocate when treatments and procedures are recommended.

- Ask questions
- Be well informed
- Have open discussions with your care receiver and health care professionals
- Let your loved one make their own final decisions about their care when possible

Questions to consider include:

- What happens if I don't do this?
- What are the benefits of doing this?
- What are the side effects?
- Where could I go to get a second opinion?

Be sure to address advance directives as well. Those end of life decisions can become important when you least expect it. Make sure you have them readily available if needed.

For people with chronic conditions:

- Find a physician who treats lots of patients with this condition if possible
- If a second opinion is desired, make sure they have all of the information gathered thus far
- Listen carefully and take notes
- If anything is unclear ask for an explanation
- Take some time to consider their recommendations so you can help your loved one make an informed choice

If a hospitalization is required it is especially important to be there for any needs that arise. Medication errors, infections, confusion, falls, bedsores, adverse drug reactions are all realities that people face when we become patients.

One of the most important things that you can do to support your care receiver is to make sure that they receive the best medical care possible. Even if you have no medical or healthcare background your knowledge of your loved one is valuable as part of the healthcare team. You know what is "normal" and "not normal" for them. It is so important that you convey your observations to the doctor and then keep communication open between the person you are caring for, yourself and their medical team. ■