

Not If, When: Preparing for a Hospitalization

Dementia Specific Tips

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On any given day, I can think of at least fifty other places I'd rather be at than a hospital. The post office? Let's buy some stamps. Holiday shopping at Kohl's? I'll grab my coupons. The DMV? Bring on those long lines. It's not that hospitals themselves are inherently bad; doctors, nurses, social workers, and other healthcare professions make up the backbone of our society. It's the crisis, new symptoms, long waits, fear of high medical costs, and pain that make a hospital trip not so pleasant. The reality is, that while many of us wouldn't choose to visit the hospital, most of us will at some point, either as a patient, or as a caregiver. When we add a disease like dementia to a hospitalization, the situation quickly becomes more complex and challenging. Below are some tips to help empower dementia caregivers to ease the stress of a hospitalization for themselves and the person they are caring for.

Make a hospital bag

This tip is all about being proactive! Having a hospital bag ready to go in case of a crisis can help prevent extra stress in the future.

Preparing an emergency bag ahead of time is a good idea. Some items to consider are

- Health insurance cards
- List of current medications, medical conditions, and allergies
- Healthcare providers names and phone numbers
- Copies of healthcare power of attorney documents, advance directives, living will
- List of names and phone numbers of emergency contact and other care partners
- Personal Information Sheet that provides patient's preferred name and language; need for glasses, dentures or hearing aids, behavior concerns; living situation.
- Snacks and bottles of water
- Comforting objects such as music player with earphones, family photos, blanket or doll or other comfort objects.
- A pad or paper and pen to write down information and directions given to you by hospital staff.
- Small amount of cash/change for vending machines.
- A note on outside to remind you to take cell phone/charger.
- Incontinence briefs, if usually worn, moist wipes, and plastic bags.
- A change of clothing, toiletries and personal medications for yourself.

Before a planned hospital stay:

- You may be able to plan for a hospital stay. There are several things you can do to make it easier on a person living with dementia. Ask their doctor if the procedure can be done as an outpatient. If not, ask if tests can be done before hospitalization to make the stay shorter. Ask questions about anesthesia, catheters and IVs. Anesthesia can often worsen dementia symptoms. Ask questions if you don't understand what is being done.

- Build a care team of family, friends and/or professional caregivers to support the person during the hospital stay. Do not try to do it alone.
- Ask for a private room with a reclining chair or bed, if insurance will cover it. It will be calmer than a shared room.
- Involve the person living with dementia in the planning process as much as possible.

During the Hospital Stay

- Make sure someone is with the person you're caring for at all times, even during medical tests, if possible.
- Educate hospital staff about the typical behavior and functioning person you're caring for. Help them understand how to interact with someone living with dementia. Make sure to tell any hospital staff about their dementia diagnosis. Don't forget that staff is caring for other patients as well. Be patient.
- Tell the doctor immediately if they seem suddenly worse or different. Medical problems such as fever, infection, medication side effects and dehydration can cause delirium, a state of extreme confusion and disorientation.
- Make sure you plan early for discharge. Ask the hospital discharge planner about eligibility for home health services, equipment, or other long-term care options. Prepare for an increased level of caregiving.
- The National Institute on Aging has a comprehensive article on hospitalization and dementia. Go to <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/going-hospital-tips-dementia-caregivers> for more information.
- Remember to be their advocate. Ask questions and make intelligent decisions. Ask for the hospital's patient advocate if you need more support.
- You are the expert on the person you're caring for – feel confident in your role as a caregiver!

Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness (EAAA) is a volunteer-run, not-for-profit organization founded to provide education and support to all families, caregivers, and people with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia in Effingham County and the surrounding area. For more information about Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness, check out the website at www.effinghamalz.org. If you are a caregiver & have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free to call Shannon Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.