



# Understanding Health Care in America

*An introduction for immigrant patients*

The health care system in the United States is complex. Some parts of the system are different in different states. This handout provides information to help you understand the health care system in the U.S. and at University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC).

Learn how the health care system works so that you get safe care and avoid frustration. And, share this information with your family and friends.

## Your American Health Care Team

To feel comfortable with the health care system, it helps to understand the doctors, nurses, and other staff you will meet.

Health care staff in the U.S. are used to working with patients whom they have just met. Staff ask every patient for their name, to avoid making mistakes. Staff treat every patient the same, no matter what their social status is. This can be hard for you if you come from a place where everyone knows you and greets you by name, and asks about your family and business.

Your care providers try to put you at ease by acting in a friendly and informal manner. The nurse may call you by your first name. A doctor might lean against a desk instead of sitting in a chair. A receptionist may chat with you while you make an appointment.

You may feel that the hospital staff are not showing respect, but no disrespect is intended.

By law, health care providers must tell you what your health problem is and what your treatment choices are. It may seem to you that they are talking very directly about your health problems. They are more concerned with making sure you know what the problem is than with protecting your feelings.



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You may feel shocked that your care provider is so direct. You might feel insulted if your doctor or nurse tells you to change your lifestyle to improve your health. You might feel afraid if your care provider tells you that you are mentally ill. Try not to be upset with the provider. Try to focus on the information you receive.

### **Gifts**

In some countries, it is the custom, or even required, for patients to give their doctors and other caregivers gifts. In the U.S., health care providers are not allowed to accept gifts of cash, valuable objects, or services. Your doctors and other providers will know that you appreciate their services if you simply tell them that they are doing a good job for you.

### **Privacy**

Your privacy is important. In the U.S., **only** you can get information about your medical care. What you ask your doctor, what you tell your doctor, and what your doctor tells you is protected. No one in your family or your community can find out anything about your care unless you give your care providers permission to tell certain people information about your health and the health care you receive.

If you want certain people to be included in talks about your care, introduce these people to your doctor. Tell your doctor how much you want members of your family and other people to know. This should be written down in your medical record.



### **Making Decisions About Your Health Care**

Tell your doctors and other care providers what your goals are for your health care. Think about these questions:

- What do you want them to help you with?
- How committed are you to getting well or staying healthy?
- What kind of information do you need?
- How do you prefer to receive information and instruction?
- How does the treatment plan fit in with your personal beliefs and lifestyle?

You will be involved in making decisions about your care. Your care provider will make a diagnosis and suggest treatment options. But, you must decide what treatment you want. Pay attention to the details, and ask questions about anything you do not understand. Tell your care provider about any concerns you have, and then decide on a plan that will work for you.

You may be used to a doctor making the decisions about your treatment. In America, you are expected to make the decisions, with information from your doctor. The doctor will ask you to make choices. This does not mean that he is not a good doctor. In the U.S. health care system, if you do not participate your doctor may think you are not interested in your health.

You may be upset that you must make decisions when you do not feel well. But, your treatment plan is just for you, so it is important for you to decide what will work best for you.

## Legal Issues

### *Children*

For most health care in the U.S., anyone younger than 18 years old must have a **parent or legal guardian with them** to receive health care. Your children cannot go to the doctor or dentist without you.

**But, anyone over 12 years old in Washington state may seek health care for themselves** for sexual activity, pregnancy, or drug or alcohol abuse.

### *Advance Directives*

You are encouraged to make an advance directive. This is a set of instructions that you write. These instructions tell your doctors what kinds of care you want if you ever become too sick to speak for yourself. Having an advance directive in your medical chart means your family will not have to make these major decisions for you.

Imagine that you have an injury or illness that puts you into a coma. Your instructions might direct your care providers to keep you alive on a machine even if there is no chance that you will recover. Or, your instructions might direct your care providers to give you medicine to ease pain and to take you off the machines that are keeping you alive.

**An advance directive tells your doctor what health care you want if you are too sick to speak for yourself.**

**Power of attorney gives someone you trust the ability to make decisions about your care and finances if you cannot.**



Making an advance directive may seem like bad luck to you. American culture looks at this differently. The intent is to make your wishes known so that your health care providers can follow them.

### *Power of Attorney*

You can also name a trusted family member or friend as your power of attorney for health care. This means that you give that person the legal power to make decisions about your care if you are not able to speak for yourself.

You can fill out a simple form and give this to your doctor or hospital to place in your medical chart. The doctors will then follow directions about your care from the person you named as your power of attorney for health care. If you become able to speak for yourself again, this power of attorney is no longer in effect.

### *Married Spouse versus Partner*

Married husbands and wives are legally able to make health care decisions for their spouse because they are the **legal next-of-kin**. But, if the patient and their partner are not legally married or are not registered domestic partners, the partner is not allowed to make these decisions. The partner may even be kept away from the patient by health care staff. **Only** the legal next-of-kin (married spouse, children, parents, other blood relatives) and registered domestic partners can make decisions for the patient.

### **Who Pays for Care**

In some countries, health care is free. Health care in the U.S. must be paid for in one of these ways:

- **You** pay for all of your health care.
- You have **health insurance through work** that pays for all or part of the health care you receive. You will pay part or all of the monthly cost of the insurance plan. Ask at work how to sign up for health insurance.
- If your employer does not offer insurance, Washington state may have a low-cost medical insurance plan that you might be able to sign up for. Check with the financial advisor at your clinic or hospital.



- If you have very little income, you may be able to receive **medical coupons**. Your children may receive medical coupons, too. This is called Medicaid.

Medical care can be very expensive. Think about how you will pay for care before you have an illness or an injury. Some things that must be paid for are:

- Appointments with your doctor
- Lab tests, X-rays, and other tests
- Emergency room visits or hospital stays
- Medicines

Always carry your insurance card or medical coupons with you.

### Questions about Medical Bills

You may have questions about a medical bill. The sooner that you ask about it, the easier it is to get it fixed. You may need to make payment arrangements.

Keep all the medical bills that you receive. Answer any phone calls from the billing department. When you talk with someone in the billing department about your bill:

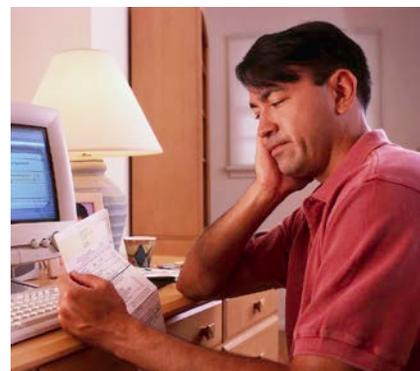
- Ask for an interpreter if you need one.
- Have your medical record number and the bill that you have questions about open in front of you.
- Be ready to give your insurance information.

### Where You Will Receive Care

#### *Your Primary Care Clinic*

Everyone should be registered with a family practice clinic for general health care needs. Family practice doctors and nurses will get to know you and your family. They will take care of you through the years. All of your health information will be in one chart.

Your family practice doctor is called your primary care provider. This doctor will refer you to a specialist if you need one, and will coordinate all of your health care needs. This may include medicines, therapy, home care, nursing home care, pregnancy care, and hospital stays.



Your primary care doctor and nurse will make a plan for your care with you, based on your goals and needs. They will help you develop healthy habits and deal with any medical illnesses or injuries.

Go to your primary care provider for non-life-threatening problems, such as colds, minor injuries, diabetes, high blood pressure, urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted infections, asthma, stomach problems, mental health questions, prenatal care, birth control, and so on. Do not go to the Emergency Room for these health problems.

### ***Emergency Care***

The Emergency Room (ER) is only for serious injuries and illnesses. For example, go to the Emergency Room if you have broken your leg, badly burned your hand, or think that you might be having a heart attack. Take children to the ER if they are sick or injured and your regular clinic is closed.

Look up the telephone number of the Emergency Room that is closest to your home. Keep this number close to your telephone or stored in your cell phone.

Bring as much information about yourself and your health history as you can to the ER. Also bring your photo ID, your medical insurance card, your medical record number (if you have one), and any medicines that you are currently using.

### **When to Call 9-1-1**

If you have a serious illness or accident and need medical care **right away**, call 9-1-1. Paramedics will come to where you are, examine you, and take you to the hospital, if needed. (The 9-1-1 operators can get interpreters on the phone to speak with you, if you need one.)

### **Clinic and Doctor Visits**

#### ***Register Before Your First Visit***

When you go to a new clinic or hospital, you will need to register. This may happen over the phone when you make your first appointment, or it may happen in person on the day of your first visit.



When you register, be prepared to give complete information about:

- Where you live.
- Who will pay your medical bills.
- How to contact you. Give your home phone number, a message phone number, a cell number, and an email address if possible.

Imagine if your doctor needed to give you test results, but could not reach you!

When you register, you will receive a **medical record number**. Write your medical record number and your health care provider's name and phone number in several places: at home, at work, and in your wallet. That way, you will have this information when you need it.

### *If You Have Questions*

If you have an appointment at a new clinic, you may have questions. Call the clinic ahead of time, and ask for an interpreter if you need one. Ask how to get there and where to park. Tell the person on the phone if you will need an interpreter for your visit and what language you speak. There is no cost to you for an interpreter.

### *Your First Visit*

Bring these items to your first visit:

- Photo ID that has your address and date of birth, such as a driver's license, green card, or passport.
- Your health insurance information.
- Any medical records, X-rays, or paperwork from other health care providers.
- All of your medicines, including teas and herbs.
- Any forms that you were asked to fill out before your first visit. These forms ask about your family history, your own medical history, and your present health condition.

**When you come for your health care visit, bring:**

- Your appointment card
- Your photo ID
- All the medicines you are now using
- Your insurance information
- Updates to your contact or residence information
- Your medical record number, if you have one.

**Be sure to tell your doctor about any herbs or teas that you use. They may affect how well your new medicines work.**



### ***Hospital or Clinic Visits After the First One***

Every time you check in to see your provider, you will be asked your name and date of birth. Also, have your photo ID with you. This prevents confusion and helps the staff match your medical record with your medicines and lab work.

**Clear identification** is important for safe patient care.

Ask for an appointment card each time you make an appointment. This card will have your doctor's name and phone number on it. Take the card home and put it where it will remind you of your appointment. You might tape it to a mirror or the refrigerator door so you see it every day.

Make appointments only for times that you know you can get to the clinic. If you need to change the time or date of your appointment, do this as far ahead of time as possible. Some providers charge a fee for missing an appointment. Some providers are very busy, so it may be hard to get another appointment soon.

Many clinics will call you 1 or 2 days before your appointment to remind you to come. If they reach an answering machine or a family member, they will leave only general information. This protects your privacy.



### ***Being on Time for Visits and Using Your Visit Time Well***

The health care system in the U.S. is focused on getting results. Clinics see many patients every day. All patients have a short visit time.

You are expected to be on time for your visits. Organize your thoughts and have your questions ready before you come to the clinic. Bring all of your paperwork and medicine bottles with you.

You may think that your health care provider should stay and talk with you about all of your health problems. But, your doctor's talk with you and family members will be direct, and it may be short. There is no time for telling long stories. Be sure to talk about your most urgent problems at the beginning of your visit. You may have to make future appointments to discuss other problems. If you know you will need extra time, ask if you can have a longer appointment when you schedule your visit.

### *Appointments for Tests*

Your medical care may include complex tests to help find out what is wrong with you. These tests might include taking pictures of your body parts with ultrasound, X-ray, or other equipment. Or, the tests might involve a doctor looking inside your body with a special instrument.

You may need to prepare for some tests in special ways. For example, you may be told:

- To stop taking certain medicines several days before the test
- Not to eat after midnight before the test
- To take laxative medicines
- To dress in a certain way
- To arrive early
- To bring an adult with you who can drive you home after your test

You will receive any special instructions when you make your appointment. Write the instructions down so that you remember them. Call your doctor's office several days before your test if you have forgotten how to prepare.

### **Asking Questions Between Visits**

At your clinic, your care team may include doctors, nurses, medical assistants, receptionists, patient care coordinators, social workers, dietitians, and therapists. If you have questions about your diagnosis, treatment, medicines, or test results, call your clinic. Give your name and ask for an interpreter, if you need one. Call early in the morning, so that staff can call you back the same day.

When you call your clinic, be ready to spell your name and give your medical record number and date of birth. Give the name of your provider, and have your medicine bottles with you when you call.

If you have to leave a message, leave as much information as you can. Use English words to describe the problem, such as "medicine makes me sick," or "my head hurts."



## **Getting Test Results**

If your doctor or nurse needs to talk with you, they will call you at home. If you are not home, clinic staff will leave a message saying that they tried to reach you. They are not allowed to leave information with anyone but you.

When you receive a message, call the person the message says to call. Have your information ready before you call. The person you speak with will be able to look at your medical record and talk about your treatment options with you. Ask for an interpreter if you need one.

## **Lab Visits**

When you give a blood or urine sample, the lab must label the container with the correct information. Show your photo ID and medical insurance card when you give a sample to a laboratory.

If the information on the container is not complete, the lab will throw away the sample and you will need to give another sample. This is to make sure that the results of your test are not put in someone else's medical record.

## **Medicines**

You may receive medicine in many forms:

### ***Pills or Capsules***

This is the most common way to take medicine. Pills are to be taken on a careful schedule. Write down when you take your pills. You do not want to miss a dose or take 2 doses by mistake.

### ***Injections***

You can get injections (shots) from a nurse or doctor, or you may give yourself injections at home. Injections are not as common in the U.S. as they are in other countries.

### ***Eye Drops and Ear Drops***

Some medicine goes directly in your eyes or ears. Have the nurse or pharmacist show you how to use the drops.



### ***Liquid Medicine Taken by Mouth***

Some medicine is taken by mouth in liquid form. Make sure you know exactly how much medicine you need. Drugstores have special spoons for giving liquid medicine so you take the right amount. Most times, these spoons are free.

### ***Cream or Salve***

Some medicine is put on the skin and rubbed in. Be sure you know exactly how much cream or salve to use. Ask your pharmacist or doctor to show you how much to put on.

### ***Suppository***

These medicines are **not** for use by mouth. A suppository is put inside the anus (rectum) or the vagina. Be sure you understand where to place the suppository.

A suppository is about the size of the tip of your finger. Sometimes the health care provider puts it in for you using a gloved hand. Sometimes you are asked to put it in yourself. You will receive instructions if you are asked to use this medicine yourself.

### ***Spray***

Some medicines are sprayed into the throat or nose, such as asthma medicines. They do not work if they are not sprayed correctly. Ask your nurse to show you how to use the spray.

### ***Tea and Herbs***

Doctors in the U.S. do not often prescribe teas or herbs. Tell your doctor about any herbs or teas that you use. Your herbs may make your new medicine weak. Or, your herbs could be similar to your new medicine, and you could get too much.

### ***How Long to Take Your Medicine***

Your provider will tell you how long to take your medicine. It could be a few days or weeks, or many years. It is important to take your medicine for as long as your provider says. Also, do not suddenly stop taking medicine you have taken for a long time. You could have a bad reaction if you do not take your medicine the right way.



## Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help.

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If your medicine makes you sick, talk with your doctor or nurse before you stop taking it. They can make a different plan for taking care of you.

### Pharmacy Tips

#### *Know About Your Medicines*

When you get medicine at the pharmacy:

- Make sure that your name is correct on the prescription bottle or package.
- Know the name of the medicine and why you take it.
- If you are getting a refill, look inside the bottle or package. Tell the pharmacist if the medicine looks different than usual.

#### *If You Need an Interpreter*

- Ask the pharmacist to call an interpreter.
- Ask the interpreter to write the instructions for taking the medicine in your language.
- Or, when the interpreter tells you the directions, write them down and take them home.

#### *Refills*

It is important to request prescription refills several days **before** you run out of medicine. Take the bottle to the pharmacy and request a refill.

Or, you may be able to order a refill of your medicine by phone. **Call the pharmacy and give this information:**

1. Your full name spelled out, and your date of birth
2. Your medical record number (if it is a clinic or hospital pharmacy)
3. The prescription number on the label
4. The name of your medicine, spelled out if possible
5. Your daytime phone number

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