

tips

Information about healthcare quality: what it is and where to find it

What is “good quality” health care?

Good quality health care is the kind of care you want for yourself and your family. It means that you get your care from skilled and knowledgeable health professionals who communicate clearly and involve you in decisions about your care. It means that you are given the type of care that medical research has shown to *work best* for your condition. Good quality also means that your care is safe and timely, and that you are able to get as much care as you need (and no unnecessary care).

While it may surprise you, it's true that **some health care is good quality care, but other care is not**. Scientific research studies of patient care have found that some patients are getting care that does *not* meet nationally accepted standards for quality of care.

What kinds of information should you use to make sure you are getting good quality health care?

1. Information that tells which types of care have been shown to work best

To find out what types of care work best, doctors and others do scientific studies of patient care. The results from this medical research can show which tests are best to find out what's wrong and which treatments help the most and have the fewest side effects. Medical research can also show what works best to catch problems at an early stage when treatment can be more effective and what works best to prevent diseases from returning.

Research results on patient care are published in medical journals and shared in other ways. When there is enough solid medical research to show that a particular approach works best, they create standards or guidelines for quality of care. Health professionals use these guidelines for quality of care to make sure they are giving their patients the care that works the best.

Most research information on patient care is written for health professionals and often quite technical. But **some information about which types of care work best has been written specifically for patients**. You can use this information to help make decisions about your care. You can also use it to check whether your care has been shown to work best. Here are examples of the types of information you can use:

- There are brochures that tell what screening tests and other care you should be getting if you have a condition such as diabetes, asthma, or heart disease.
- There are summaries of research results written for patients. These compare different treatments and discuss which ones have been shown to work best for certain conditions. This information often includes references to the research studies that were done.

Learn more

Contact your health plan to find out what resources are available to you. Blue Cross and Blue Shield Service Benefit Plan members have access to online tools to manage their health such as the Blue Health Assessment, MyBlue Personal Health Record where they can track their health record and the records of each covered family member, and Blue Health Connection where they can access an Audio Health Library and online Clinical Reference System.

The federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has produced summaries for patients that tell about effective health treatments for selected conditions. These summaries are based on expert reviews of medical research and located at effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov.

The Cochrane Collaboration is an international not-for-profit and independent organization that reviews medical research studies about healthcare treatments. The website www.cochrane.org has easy-to-understand summaries of the findings of its reviews in the Cochrane Library.

A government website with technical medical information for health professionals includes some links to resources that are written for patients. Go to www.guideline.gov, click on *Resources* and then click on *Patient Resources Links*.

2. Feedback from patients about care they have received

Some information about healthcare quality comes directly from patients themselves, usually from surveys that ask patients about the care they have received. **Patients are the best or only source of certain information about quality of care**, such as how well their doctors listen and explain, and how easy it is for patients to get the care they need.

Results from patient surveys are sometimes included in reports of quality comparisons that are available to the public. When you are choosing a health plan, hospital, or other healthcare provider, the results from patient surveys can help you compare your choices.

3. Qualifications of those who provide your health care

To help judge the quality of doctors or other health professionals, you can consider their training, experience, and other qualifications. For example, some doctors get extra training in their field and pass tests to become “board certified.”

There are independent non-profit organizations that use specific quality standards to do careful reviews and inspections of health plans, hospitals, nursing homes, and home health agencies throughout the country. These reviews cover such things as qualifications of the healthcare providers, quality of care received by patients, and systems that are used to help protect patient safety and privacy.

Some of these reviewing organizations give a “seal of approval” by accrediting the health plans, hospitals, or other healthcare organizations that pass the review. Others issue inspection reports that detail the types of problems that were found. Knowing the results from these reviews and inspections can help you make quality comparisons.

4. Reports with information that lets you make quality comparisons

If you need to choose a health plan, hospital, nursing home, medical group, or other healthcare provider organization, look for reports with information that can help you make quality comparisons.

Most reports with quality comparisons are produced by state or federal government agencies, large business groups, or healthcare coalitions. They are typically on websites and some are available as printed reports. They are often called *quality report cards*, *quality score cards*, or *healthcare performance reports*.

The type of quality comparisons included depends on the report. For example, a report might let you compare healthcare professionals or healthcare organizations based on:

- How well they give patients the type of care that works best, based on results from research on patient care
- Feedback from patients about the care they have received
- Qualifications and experience of those who provide the care

To help you make good decisions about health care, government websites provide a number of reports with quality comparisons, including the ones listed below. You can use these websites to compare the quality of care within a state, county, city, or ZIP code.

- For hospital care: www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov
- For nursing home care: www.medicare.gov/NHCompare
- For home health care: www.medicare.gov/HHCompare
- For kidney dialysis facilities: www.Medicare.gov/dialysis

Visit the website for the National Committee for Quality Assurance at www.ncqa.org. Click on *report cards* for a variety of information about quality comparisons of health plans, doctors, and more.

The government has produced a national directory of quality reports called the Report Card Compendium, online at www.talkingquality.gov/compendium/. You can search this database which has more than 200 reports of comparative information on the quality of health plans, hospitals, medical groups, individual physicians, nursing homes, and other providers of health care.

Tips on how to find information about healthcare quality

Ask your doctor and other healthcare professionals and organizations

Your doctors and other health professionals may have patient education materials for you. You can also ask them where to find information related to quality of care. For example:

- You can ask where to find information about the quality of care guidelines that apply to your medical conditions.
- When there are treatment choices to consider, ask where you can find information to help you understand your condition and information with medical evidence to help make your treatment decisions.

Other sources for information about healthcare quality include member services at your health plan, hospitals in your community, and the non-profit organizations that focus on particular health conditions, such as the American Diabetes Association. Ask if they have information about quality of care for your condition.

Look on websites

To be sure the information is trustworthy, choose your websites carefully.

Websites can be a great source of information about health care and quality of care. There are thousands of websites with health information and opinions. However, the **Internet is not regulated**, and this means that anyone can put anything on a website. To make sure that the information you find is reliable and up to date, **be very careful about which websites you use**. A good resource to find information is your health plan. For example, Blue Cross and Blue Shield Service Benefit Plan members have access to www.fepblue.org.

Use libraries

You can get help from librarians and access to computers for website searches.

Many types of information about healthcare quality are available at libraries. A librarian can help you look up the information you need.

Public libraries also have computers you can use to visit websites that have health information. If you need help on how to use a computer to get information from a website, a librarian can show you how.

Learn more

This flier is part of a series of information resources to help you get good quality health care. For more resources, visit your health plan's website or call their Customer Service line. Blue Cross and Blue Shield Service Benefit Plan members can go to www.fepblue.org, access Blue Health Connection at **(888) 258-3432**, or call the Customer Service line at **(800) 824-8839** for more information.