
Communication in hospital

Summary

- Talk to your nurse if you have any health issues during your hospital stay.
 - Ask a friend, carer or family member to help you in discussions with your healthcare provider if you think your needs are not being met or would like extra support while you are in hospital.
 - You can ask for an interpreter to help communicate your needs in a public hospital.
 - All public hospitals in Victoria have patient liaison officers who can help if you are having trouble communicating your needs to hospital staff.
 - You can ask for a special diet, such as vegetarian, gluten-free, diabetes-friendly, kosher or halal meals.
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During your time in hospital you will see a variety of staff involved in your healthcare. You may have difficulty communicating because of your health condition, effects of medication, because you have an ongoing disability or because your preferred language is not English. You may be unsure about asking questions or having information repeated to you. You may want to ask for information explained to you another way, such as being drawn or written down.

Poor communication between hospital staff and patients may affect:

- your quality of care
- your recovery
- the length of your hospital stay.

Some people can find it difficult to communicate with their healthcare team and express their needs at hospital, because the processes and terms used are often unfamiliar and they do not know who to ask for help. They may also be overwhelmed by their medical situation. Hospitals provide a wide range of support to help you get the services you need including social workers interpreters in your preferred language.

Healthcare staff in hospital

There are many people who contribute to your care while you are in hospital. Every step of the way, you will meet doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and support staff, who all play an important role in your recovery.

Hospital nurses manage most of your ongoing care and treatment. They assess, plan and administer your daily treatment and manage your general health. Speak to them about your immediate needs. They can also direct you to the right people to speak to about specific medical issues.

You have a right to an accredited interpreter for communication needs with the people who provide your healthcare. Interpreters should be provided at important points during your care, such as when discussing medical history, treatments, test results, diagnoses, during admission and assessment, and when you are required to give informed consent.

All Victorian hospitals employ a patient liaison officer. It is this person's job to help patients and their families with concerns during a hospital stay. You can speak to them about your non-medical issues, such as financial questions.

During your hospital stay, you will also see a wide range of support and administrative staff taking care of everything from laundry and meals, to patient transport and maintenance.

Sometimes, dealing with changes to health can be stressful for patients and their families. You may have concerns as you go through treatment and start planning for the future. There are people who can help support you through these difficult times and help you to communicate your needs to your healthcare team.

Communicating with hospital staff

Hospitals can be busy places and sometimes staff will not have a lot of time to spend with each patient. To make the most of your time:

- be open and honest so the people who are looking after you understand what is going on
- talk about your highest priority worries first. If there is time, you can go on to other questions
- use brief descriptions of your concern or need. Staff will ask the questions if they need to clarify something
- if you do not understand what someone is saying, let the person know during the conversation. If you wait until the end, they may have to see their next patient and not have time to re-explain something
- you may not be able to get answers straightaway. The person may refer you to someone else or have to get back to you. Accept this unless you feel the person is brushing you off or does not get back to you as promised.

When communicating with hospital staff, remember:

- you have a right to ask questions
- if you discover that any of the hospital's information about you is incorrect, speak up as soon as possible
- do not expect that your health information will be shared with other healthcare professionals, even in the same hospital. Sometimes, another person may want to get information directly from you
- some staff within the hospital will require different information from you, while others will ask you the same questions. Be prepared to repeat your information at times
- you have a right to ask about who is examining you and why. Do not hesitate to ask for an explanation of your treatment or investigations.

Making your preferences clear

Although you will probably be asked about how you want to be cared for and communicated with in hospital, it is up to you to make your preferences clear. For example, explain your preferences for:

- language (ask for an interpreter in your preferred language if you feel you need one)
- dietary needs
- allergies
- male or female members of treating staff
- medical treatments such as blood transfusions and resuscitation
- end-of-life care.

Overcoming communication issues

Make sure you are talking to the right person about the right issue. If you have a question about your treatment, start by speaking with your nurse. For non-medical issues, talk to a patient liaison officer or social worker, who can answer questions or point you in the right direction for help.

Other ways to overcome communication issues include asking:

- for an interpreter in your preferred language if you need one. A professional interpreter, will be provided by the hospital at no cost to you
- the person to explain in another way
- a family member or friend for help
- to speak to a patient liaison officer or social worker
- questions if someone's instructions or explanations are not clear to you
- hospital staff for information and telling them about any issues or concerns you have about your treatment or care, even if they do not ask
- to speak with a pastoral care and spirituality staff member.

Support from family and friends

If you would like some extra help communicating your needs in hospital, ask a friend or family member to support you. They can help you in discussions with your healthcare provider if you think your needs are not being heard or met.

Sometimes, the amount of information you receive in hospital about your condition can be overwhelming. Medical staff use terms that may not be familiar to you. It helps to have a support person there so they can take notes during consultations with your doctor or surgeon, and write down any important information, such as things you need to do during your recovery, or what medication to take, how much and how often.

Communicating with a social worker

Social workers can help with a wide range of issues that may arise during treatment. Social workers can help with:

- counselling
- advocacy
- discharge planning
- bereavement counselling
- risk and psychosocial assessments
- family violence
- care coordination
- crisis intervention
- family support
- referrals to out-of-hospital help.

Speak to your nurse or doctor for a referral to a social worker in your hospital.

Communicating with pastoral care and spirituality staff

Victorian hospitals offer pastoral care and spirituality support to patients and their relatives of all faiths, beliefs and spirituality. A hospital stay can bring feelings of anxiety, fear and uncertainty, and you may want to talk to someone about how you are feeling.

Pastoral carers are interested in your wellbeing. They will listen carefully to the things that are important to you and support you during your hospital stay. You do not need a referral to see a pastoral carer and the hospital can often organise carers with specific faith or religious backgrounds to suit your needs.

Ask your nurse or the ward administration staff about how to contact a pastoral carer.

Using interpreters and translated materials

People from all backgrounds can benefit from language and cultural support in Victoria's hospitals. You have a right to an accredited interpreter in your preferred language, to help you communicate with your doctor and healthcare team. They can also help communicate any special requests you may have.

Hospitals across Victoria provide free and confidential interpreter services. You can ask for an interpreter during a pre-admission appointment or, when you arrive, ask your doctor, nurse or a ward administration staff member.

Interpreters are available for more than 200 languages, including Auslan (Australian Sign Language). If you speak a specific dialect or would prefer a male or female interpreter, let the hospital or interpreting staff know your requirements.

Your hospital may also have information brochures, which have been translated into your preferred language,

Communicating about meals and nutrition

Hospitals provide nutritionally balanced meals and menu plans that cater to a wide range of tastes and requirements. Menu plans usually change often to offer variety. If your hospital stay is going to be a long one, speak to a nurse about arranging to have a nutrition plan developed that will help with your recovery.

Hospitals offer menus for children, as well as for patients who require a special diet, such as gluten-free, diabetes-friendly, vegetarian, kosher or halal meals. Each hospital will have its own instructions for ordering special menus, but if you have a special request, speak to your nurse or a patient services assistant to find out how to organise this.

In some hospitals, you can order meals for your guests, although you have to pay for these. Speak to your nurse or the patient services assistant to find out if you can order meals for your guests.

If you are unhappy with communication in hospital

If you are unhappy with the communication in hospital:

- Speak first to the person who you are having the communication difficulty with. It may just be a case of them explaining things better to improve your understanding.
- Ask to speak to a patient liaison officer. Most hospitals have a patient representative, patient liaison officer or social worker whose job it is to talk to patients about any issues.
- Ask a friend or family member to communicate your concerns on your behalf.

All hospitals have a complaints process that you can access if you are still unhappy about the communication process. Speak to a patient liaison officer about how to make a complaint.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Nursing staff
- Ward administration staff
- Patient liaison officer
- Pastoral carer
- Social worker

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