

How to Help After a Hospital Stay

10 Tips for Caregivers

Whether your loved one is in the hospital because of a first or repeat episode of heart failure, it can be a stressful time.

These days, people tend to spend less time in the hospital to recover; usually an average of 4-5 days, and sometimes just overnight. That means additional care is often needed at home.

Knowing how to best help your loved one transition home and continue to closely manage their care after leaving the hospital can be hard. You might worry about their health declining or how to manage their care, especially after he or she has been receiving round-the-clock care and supervision in the hospital. The best thing you can do is to plan ahead and know what to expect.



Everyone's experience is different, but here are some tips that might help:

1. Get to know the full healthcare team.

Write down their names, roles and best contact information. Social workers and case managers usually help to coordinate what care is needed after a hospital stay. You can help by giving them a realistic picture of life at home and what challenges might make treatment difficult.

2. Ask about discharge planning early on so you have time to prepare.

Planning for the day your loved one leaves the hospital should start on day 1. If he or she will return home, think about what changes are needed to ease the transition and assure their safety. For example, getting assistive devices such as grabbers or canes, rolling up rugs or addressing other tripping hazards, installing grab bars or having a special seat for the bathtub/shower, etc.

Be honest about what support you have in place, your limitations (work or young children), and what else you might need to help maximize their recovery.

3. Schedule a post-hospital follow-up medical visit, ideally before you leave the hospital.

This appointment, ideally within 7 days of discharge, gives everyone a chance to check in, review the hospital stay, any blood work and imaging tests, medication changes and self-care activities. Research shows that people who are seen within one week of leaving the hospital are less likely to end up back in the hospital in the coming month.

4. Learn all you can about your loved one's condition and what to expect from their recovery.

Living with heart failure is a journey, so try to take one step at a time.

5. Ask if the hospital has information or training for caregivers.

These days, caregivers often assume many tasks with little or no training. The extent to which you will need to help depends on the severity of your loved one's condition. Caregivers may need to assist with:

- Activities of daily living (bathing, dressing, grooming, meal preparation, etc.)
- Assessing how much pain someone is in
- Filling prescription medicines
- Coordinating with various members of the team for added services (for example, occupational therapy, physical therapy, nursing aide, meals)

6. Know what medications will be needed.

The care team at the hospital should:

- Review what medications will be sent home with your loved one, and
- Alert you to any that have been stopped during the hospital stay

Ask questions about what each medicine is for and when and how they should be taken. Redo your written medication list and review it with the care team prior to discharge. If there are any discrepancies or if you have questions, ask the doctor before leaving.

7. Ask about rehabilitation and other support services.

Sometimes, patients with heart failure or who are recovering from a heart attack, stroke or cardiac surgery are sent to a short-term inpatient rehab hospital. Cardiac rehab may also be recommended.

8. Recognize what might signal a decline in your loved one's condition, including any new or worsening symptoms, to help stay ahead of problems.

- ⚠ Swelling in the legs, feet, ankles or stomach
- ⚠ Rapid weight gain
- ⚠ Needing to sit upright in a chair or use pillows to sleep or breathe easier
- ⚠ Feeling even more short of breath
- ⚠ Feeling weak, lightheaded or more tired than usual
- ⚠ A stubborn, dry cough

9. Be an advocate.

Heart failure is a lifelong condition that gets worse over time. It's important to make sure your loved one is getting the best possible care, and that his or her goals for treatment are being met.

10. Take care of yourself.

Being a caregiver is hard work. It's exhausting physically, but it can also take an emotional toll. Make sure to take time for yourself - eat nourishing food, get plenty of rest and take steps to lower stress. If you need to and can hire help, do it.