

## **A DAYTRIP TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM**

A visit to the emergency room is an upsetting experience for anyone and it is especially frightening for an older adult with a failing memory. Medical emergencies occur frequently in older people with multiple chronic diseases and are especially likely to occur in those with memory disorders like Alzheimer's disease. Fortunately, many illnesses and injuries can be diagnosed and treated in the emergency room and don't require a hospital stay.

### **PLAN AHEAD FOR ER VISITS**

The best time to prepare a plan for emergency care is when your older relative is still in good health. Begin planning by choosing the hospital closest to your home that provides outpatient emergency services and is closest to your home or your older relative's home. Contact the hospital to find out if the facility accepts your parent's health insurance.

After selecting a hospital, you and your parent can prepare a summary of his or her parent's medical conditions including:

- allergies
- over-the-counter and prescription medications
- dates of recent hospitalizations
- insurance information
- the name and telephone number of his primary care physician
- family contact information.

The summary can be distributed to staff and can help speed up ER admittance procedures. Be sure to update this document when information changes.

Keep a current list of all medications your relative takes -- including vitamins, supplements, herbal remedies, over-the-counter and non-prescription drugs along with a list of drugs that he or she is allergic to. Update the list if your parent's medications change. Your pharmacist can also provide a list of all your parent's medications. Bring several copies with you for emergency room staff.

### **THE EMERGENCY ROOM EXPERIENCE**

Emergency rooms are busy places so you and your older relative should be prepared for a long wait to see a doctor. Find out where restrooms are located and if there's a cafeteria or vending machines where you can buy snacks and drinks. Try and keep your parent (and yourself!) as calm and comfortable as you can. Reassure her that everything will be okay and that she'll be going home soon.

As the caregiver you'll be responsible for providing most of the information about your parent's overall health and her current symptoms to the ER staff. You'll also need to make sure that all staff are aware that your parent has a memory disorder. This will help them understand difficult or unusual behaviors and to diagnose and treat your parent's condition more accurately.

After the physical exam is completed you both will continue to wait until all test results are ready and the doctor can explain the results to you and any treatments or

medications that may be needed. Ask the doctor to send test results to your parent's primary care physician and if follow-up appointments are needed. The hospital may provide written instructions for care at home. Make sure you understand these instructions and don't hesitate to ask the doctor or a nurse to explain them.

## **THE ROLE OF FAMILY CAREGIVERS IN THE EMERGENCY ROOM**

Before you leave the hospital, be sure to ask the doctors, nurses and other staff members who managed your parent's care about medications, diet, follow-up appointments, activity restrictions or other concerns.

Caregivers provide so much support, hope and encouragement to their ill family members while they are in the hospital and will continue to do so when they return home. Being in a hospital emergency room is no fun and your relative (and you!) will be so relieved (and tired) when he is finally discharged. [587/6/10]