



# Guide to Choosing A Hospital



**CENTERS FOR  
MEDICARE  
& MEDICAID  
SERVICES**



# This official government booklet explains:

- Steps to find and compare hospitals
- Why hospital quality is important
- Information about Medicare and hospital stays

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- Visiting [hhs.gov/ocr/civilrights/complaints](https://hhs.gov/ocr/civilrights/complaints).
- Writing: Office for Civil Rights

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Room 509F, HHH Building  
Washington, D.C. 20201

# Section 1

## Steps to choosing a hospital

When you're sick, you may go to the closest hospital or the hospital where your doctor practices. But which hospital is the best for your individual needs? Research shows that some hospitals do a better job taking care of patients with certain conditions than other hospitals.

When you have a life-threatening emergency, always go to the nearest hospital. However, if you're planning to have surgery, or if you have a condition like heart disease and know you may need hospital care in the future, use the steps on pages 10-15 to learn about your hospital choices. Understanding your choices will help you have a more informed discussion with your doctor or other health care provider.

# Before you get started

Make the most of your appointments with your doctor or other health care provider to learn about your condition and health care needs:

- Before your appointment, make a list of things you want to talk to your doctor or provider about (like recent symptoms, drug side effects, or other general health questions). Bring this list to your appointment.
- Bring any prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, and supplements to your appointment and review them with your doctor or provider.
- Take notes during your appointment. Then, take a moment to repeat back to the doctor or provider what they told you. Ask any questions you may have.
- Bring along a trusted family member or friend.
- Ask if there's any written information about your condition that you can take with you
- Call the office if you have questions when you get home.

# Steps to choosing a hospital checklist

## STEP 1: Learn about the care you need and your hospital choices

### Talk to your doctors or health care providers:

Find out which hospitals they work with.

Ask which hospitals they think give the best care for your condition (for example, have enough staffing, coordinate care, promote medication safety, and prevent infection).

Ask how well these hospitals check and improve their quality of care. See page 20.

Ask if the hospitals participate in Medicare or in the network of your Medicare Advantage Plan (like an HMO or PPO) or other Medicare health plan, if you have one.

	<b>Based on your condition, ask your doctors or health care providers:</b>
	Ask if you should consider a specialty hospital, teaching hospital (usually part of a university), community hospital, or one that does research or has clinical trials related to your condition?
	Ask if you need a surgeon or other type of specialist, what's their experience and success treating your condition?
	Who will be responsible for your overall care while you're in the hospital?
	Will you need care after leaving the hospital and, if so, what kind of care? Who will arrange this care?
	Are there any alternatives to hospital care?

## STEP 2: Think about your personal and financial needs

### Check your hospital insurance coverage:

Do you need permission from your Medicare health plan (like a preauthorization or a referral) before you're admitted for hospital care?

If you need care that's not emergency care, do you have to use only the network of your Medicare health plan? Do you have to use certain hospitals or see certain surgeons or specialists?

Do you have to pay more to use a hospital (surgeon or specialist) that doesn't participate in your Medicare health plan, if you have one?

Do you need to meet certain requirements to get care after you leave the hospital?.

## Think about your preferences:

Do you want a hospital located near family members or friends?

Does the hospital have convenient visiting hours and other rules that are important to you (for example, can a relative or someone helping with your care stay overnight in the room with you)?

## STEP 3: Find and compare hospitals based on your condition and needs

**Visit Hospital Compare** at [Medicare.gov/hospitalcompare](https://www.medicare.gov/hospitalcompare) to:

- Find hospitals by name, city, state, or ZIP code.
- Check the results of patient surveys (what patients said about their hospital experience).
- Compare the results of certain measures of quality that show how well these hospitals treat patients with certain conditions.

**See Section 2** (page 16) for a closer look at hospital quality and Hospital Compare. You can also call **1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)**. TTY users can call **1-877-486-2048**.

Search online for other sources to compare the quality of the hospitals you're considering. Some states have laws that require hospitals to report data about the quality and cost of their care and post the data online.

## **STEP 4: Discuss your hospital options, and choose a hospital**

Talk with family members or friends about the hospitals you're comparing.

Talk to your doctor or health care provider about how the hospital information you gathered applies to you.

Considering these factors, choose the hospital that's best for you.

## Quick summary of what to look for when comparing hospitals. Look for a hospital that:

	Has the best experience with your condition.
	Checks and improves the quality of its care.
	Performs well on measures of quality, including a national patient survey. Visit Hospital Compare at <a href="https://www.medicare.gov/hospitalcompare">Medicare.gov/hospitalcompare</a> .
	Participates in Medicare (and your Medicare health plan, if you have one).
	Meets your needs in terms of location and other factors, like visiting hours.
	Is covered by your Medicare health plan.

# Section 2

## A closer look at hospital quality

### What is quality hospital care?

Hospitals provide good quality care when they give you the care and treatments known to get the best results for your condition. Getting quality hospital care may help with your recovery and help you avoid other problems. Not all hospitals provide the same quality of care.

Most hospitals have programs to check and improve the quality of the care they provide. They may collect and monitor information from patient charts to see where they can improve patient care. They may survey patients about their hospital experience using the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) Survey. Many hospitals report the information they collect to their state and to Medicare.

Medicare, the states, and other hospital industry leaders review this information and help hospitals take steps to improve quality. Some of the information about hospital quality is available online. See pages 21-22 for a list of other organizations that work to improve hospital quality.

## **How can I find information about hospital quality?**

Visit Hospital Compare at [Medicare.gov/hospitalcompare](https://www.medicare.gov/hospitalcompare) for more information on hospital quality.

Hospital Compare gives you a “snapshot” of how well hospitals in your area, and around the nation, care for patients. Use this information when you talk to your doctor or other health care provider about which hospital is best for you.

## **How does Hospital Compare work?**

When you visit Hospital Compare, whether from your home computer, your tablet, or your smart phone, finding information about the quality of hospitals

is just a couple steps away:

- Click on “Find a hospital,” and decide if you want to look for hospitals by the hospital name, city, state, or ZIP code.
- Select the hospitals you want to compare.

## What kind of information is on Hospital Compare?

You can compare hospitals based on these and more:

- What did other patients think about their hospital stay? Recently discharged patients responded to a national survey about their hospital experience. The survey asks questions like how well their hospital’s doctors and nurses communicate with patients, and how well they manage their patients’ pain.
- Did hospitals give timely and effective care? Find information like how often hospitals give recommended treatments for certain common conditions, like heart attack, heart failure, pneumonia, children’s asthma, and surgery.

- Did patients get better? Learn how hospitals' rates of readmission, complications, and mortality (death) rates for certain conditions compared with the national rate.
- Is the hospital careful about giving people too many tests? Learn how each hospital uses outpatient medical imaging tests, like CT scans and MRIs.

If you're in a Medicare Advantage Plan (like an HMO or PPO) or other Medicare health plan, Hospital Compare doesn't have information about whether your care will be covered in a certain hospital. Check with your plan.

The information on Hospital Compare is updated regularly. Check Hospital Compare often for the most up-to-date results and new information.

If you don't have a computer or internet access, your local library, senior center, a family member, or friend may be able to help you. You can also call **1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)**. TTY users can call **1-877-486-2048**.

# What other organizations work to improve hospital quality?

- Quality Improvement Organizations (QIO's) are organizations that employ a group of practicing doctors and other health care experts paid by the federal government to check and improve the care given to people with Medicare.
- Some states and accrediting organizations also post information about the quality of their hospitals. See below.

## About hospital evaluations

To participate in Medicare, hospitals must comply with Medicare health and safety regulations. A hospital's compliance with those regulations may be evaluated (surveyed) by your State Survey Agency or by a national accreditation organization whose hospital accreditation program has been approved by Medicare. Hospitals may choose either method of evaluation. You can check with a hospital you're considering to see if it's evaluated by a State Survey Agency or by one of the national accreditation programs.

Currently, Medicare has approved the hospital accreditation programs of 4 national accrediting organizations (listed below and on the next page) to check the hospital's compliance with the Medicare Conditions of Participation. If a hospital you're considering is accredited by one of these organizations, you can go online, call, or write to find out if there's information that the organization can share with you about the hospital's performance. You can also call the applicable organization if you have a complaint about a hospital.

## **The Joint Commission**

1 Renaissance Boulevard  
Oakbrook Terrace, IL 60181-4294

**1-630-792-5800**

[jointcommission.org](http://jointcommission.org)

## **American Osteopathic Association**

142 East Ontario Street  
Chicago, IL 60611

**1-800-621-1773**

**1-312-202-8000**

[osteopathic.org](http://osteopathic.org)

## **Det Norsk Veritas Health Care (DNVHC)**

463 Ohio Pike, Suite 203

Cincinnati, OH 45255

**1-866-523-6842**

dnvaccreditation.com

## **Center for Improvement in Healthcare Quality (CIHQ)**

P. O. Box 3620

McKinney, TX 75070

**1-866-324-5080**

cihq.org

You can also call or write to your State Survey Agency for copies of any survey reports or any other quality information they may have on your hospital. State Survey Agencies can also handle complaints about any accredited hospitals.

Visit [CMS.gov/medicare/provider-enrollment-and-certification/surveycertificationgeninfo/downloads/survey-and-certification-state-agency-contacts-2017.pdf](https://www.cms.gov/medicare/provider-enrollment-and-certification/surveycertificationgeninfo/downloads/survey-and-certification-state-agency-contacts-2017.pdf) for state contact information.

# What can I do to improve the quality of the hospitals in my area?

- Talk to the staff about the care you're getting. Ask questions if something doesn't seem right to you.
- Become a hospital volunteer.
- Become an advocate for better care by writing a letter to, or talking with, hospital leaders about ways to improve the care they provide.
- Serve on a hospital board or committee.
- Keep learning about the quality of the hospitals in your area.

# Section 3

## Medicare and your hospital stay

### How can I find information about Medicare coverage of hospital services?

Original Medicare helps cover certain medical services and supplies in hospitals. If you have both Medicare Part A (Hospital Insurance) and Medicare Part B (Medical Insurance), you can get the full range of Medicare-covered services in a hospital.

**Note:** If you're in a Medicare Advantage Plan (like an HMO or PPO) or other Medicare health plan, read your plan materials. These plans provide all your Part A and Part B coverage and may have limitations on how you get coverage (like requiring you to use network hospitals or to get prior authorization for a non-emergency hospital stay).

For more information about Medicare-covered hospital services, look at your “Medicare & You” handbook, or visit [Medicare.gov/medicare-and-you](https://www.Medicare.gov/medicare-and-you). You can also call **1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)**. TTY users can call **1-877-486-2048**

## Are you a hospital inpatient or outpatient?

Did you know that even if you stay in the hospital overnight, you might still be considered an outpatient? Whether you’re an inpatient or an outpatient (your hospital status) affects how much you pay for hospital services (like X-rays, drugs, and lab tests). You also need to have a 3-day inpatient hospital stay for Medicare to cover care you get in a skilled nursing facility. If you’re in the hospital more than a few hours, always ask your doctor or the hospital staff if you’re an inpatient or an outpatient.

You may get a “Medicare Outpatient Observation Notice” (MOON) that lets you know if you’re an inpatient or outpatient in a hospital or critical access hospital. You’ll get this notice if you’re getting outpatient observation services for more than 24 hours. The MOON will tell you why you’re an outpatient

receiving observation services. It will also let you know how this may affect what you pay while in the hospital, and for care you get after leaving the hospital.

Learn more about the differences between inpatient and outpatient services by viewing the fact sheet, “Are You a Hospital Inpatient or Outpatient? If you have Medicare—Ask!” Visit [Medicare.gov/publications](https://www.Medicare.gov/publications). You can also call **1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)**. TTY users can call **1-877-486-2048**.

## What are my rights in the hospital?

No matter which hospital you choose, as a person with Medicare, you have certain rights and protections while you’re in the hospital. For example, you have the right to be included in decisions about your care and the right to appeal certain decisions about your coverage. For more information about these rights, visit [Medicare.gov](https://www.Medicare.gov). You can also call **1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)**.

If you feel you’re being asked to leave the hospital too soon, you have the right to request a review of that decision by a Beneficiary and Family Centered Care-Quality Improvement Organization (BFCC-QIO). This is explained in the

notice called “An Important Message from Medicare about Your Rights.” The hospital should give you a copy of this notice. If you don’t get a copy, ask your nurse or the hospital’s patient advocate to get you one.

## **Who can help me if I have a complaint about my hospital care?**

If you have a complaint about the quality of the care you, a family member, or someone you care for got at a hospital, contact the BFCC-QIO for your state. If you have other complaints about a hospital, contact your State Survey Agency. Visit [Medicare.gov/contacts](https://www.Medicare.gov/contacts) to get the phone number for your BFCC-QIO and State Survey Agency. You can also call **1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)**.

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**

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