

# What Nurses Know

(THAT CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE)

By *Leslie Pepper*

**FROM THE FRONT LINES** of health care, these men and women share insider advice on doctors, hospitals, prescription drugs, and more.

Illustrations by Andrea De Santis

## Find out the ratio of nurses to patients

"Nurses are a hospital's best surveillance system, and having fewer patients allows us to observe you more carefully. If you have a choice of which hospital to use, contact the information center to see if the facility has fewer than six patients to every nurse on a regular floor." *Diana Mason, senior policy service professor at George Washington University School of Nursing*

## REAL-LIFE ADVICE

### Rethink having elective surgery in July

"New medical school graduates start their residencies then. Also avoid scheduling before a holiday weekend—hospitals may be short staffed, and some lab tests and other diagnostic services might not be available."

*Bonnie Brown, nurse administrator at Boston University*

### KNOW THE SIGNS OF AN ANEURYSM

"If you experience a severe headache and/or vomiting, vision or speech problems, imbalance, or a change in mental state, you could be having symptoms of a ruptured brain aneurysm, and you need to call 911 immediately. People sometimes ignore these signs, but if it's the worst headache of your life, you should get checked out immediately."

*Kimberly Lombardo and Nicole Salant, nurse practitioners at the Brain Aneurysm Center at North Shore University Hospital*



### Help us stay focused

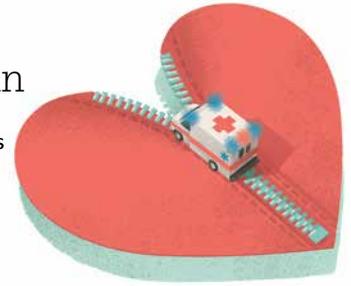
"The worst time to chat with nurses is when they're administering medication or programming equipment like monitors or IV pumps. We want to talk to you, just not while we need to focus on what we're doing so we don't make mistakes."

*Kati Kleber, certified critical care nurse in Charlotte, NC*

### Don't drive yourself to the hospital if you have chest pain

"This sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised how many people do it. You should call 911 instead. EMTs have everything necessary to keep you alive and will alert the hospital that you're coming so that everything and everyone will be ready when you arrive."

*Karen Yates, chest pain coordinator at Methodist Mansfield Medical Center*



### Check your wristband

"When you're admitted to the hospital, make sure the name and date of birth on your wristband are correct. If that wristband falls off during your stay, refuse to do anything until it's back on. Saying that mix-ups occur with patients would be an understatement."

*Ruth Tarantine, dean of nursing for Colorado Technical University*



### TELL THE TRUTH

"Developing the most effective plan of care comes largely from listening to a patient's story. I admit patients who are coming in from the emergency room, and believe me, there's nothing you could tell me that I haven't heard before."

*Susan Spielman, advanced practice nurse for the division of hospital medicine at Loyola University Medical Center*

### Store medical information in your phone

"Line up your medications with their labels showing, take a photo with your phone, and save it. Keep your diagnosis and important numbers in your phone as well so you'll have them when you need them."

*Edwin Torres, nurse practitioner in the department of endocrinology at Montefiore Medical Center*

## EXAMINE YOUR MEDICATION

"Whenever you get a prescription filled, make sure the drug name on the bottle matches what you were prescribed.

If you've taken the medication before and a pill looks different from what you're used to, ask the pharmacist why."

*Joy Hertzog,  
nurse office manager  
for internal medicine at  
Summit Medical Group*



## Be extra vigilant during admission and discharge

"Mistakes are most likely to happen when you're going in or out of the hospital. Arrive at admissions with a printed medical profile that includes your past medical and surgical information; any chronic conditions you have; a list of medications you're taking, including OTCs and supplements; and any allergies or intolerances to drugs and foods.

Make sure you have someone with you at discharge to take notes or to record what the doctor says, as long as he or she gives permission."

*Teri Dreher, owner  
and CEO, NShore  
Patient Advocates*



## Make a mammogram less painful

"Many women ask for a mammogram tech who won't squeeze the life out of their breasts, but the best mammo gets breasts the flattest. The breast tissue needs to be as thin as possible so the x-ray can see through it. That makes the image ideal for detecting cancer. Taking Tylenol an hour before can ease the discomfort."

*Lillie Shockney,  
administrative  
director of the  
Johns Hopkins  
Breast Center*

## Take a probiotic with an antibiotic

"Antibiotics kill a variety of germs, along with the healthy cells and 'good' gut bacteria that probiotics can help replace."

*Nick Angelis,  
nurse anesthetist  
at Sacred Heart  
Hospital in Florida*

## Insist that nurse handoffs be done in front of you

"When the hospital nurses going off duty share information with the nurses coming on, you or a family member should ask them to do it at your bedside. We use the phrase 'nothing about you without you.' We want you to be engaged in that handoff so you can be sure all the important information gets communicated and any mistakes are corrected."

*Deana Sievert, chief nursing  
officer at ProMedica  
Toledo Hospital*



## ASK US FOR A REFERRAL

"We have firsthand knowledge about patient outcomes and where patients and their families can go to get the best care and have the best experience."

*Pam Cipriano, president of the American Nurses Association*



## Have an emergency plan for meds

"If you have a chronic disease, think through how you'll keep enough of your medications on hand. If you need refrigerated insulin, for example, know who sells dry ice in your area in case of a power failure. Or look into getting a small generator for your home."

*Sue Anne Bell, clinical associate professor of nursing at the University of Michigan*



## Use your call light

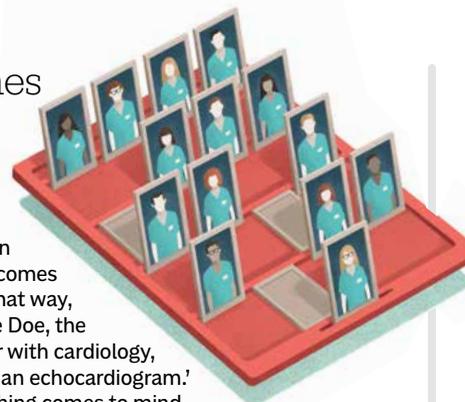
"You're not inconveniencing us. We're there to help you, especially when you're trying to get out of bed or go to the bathroom. Falls can increase the length of your stay or cause serious injury. Always err on the side of caution and call for the nurse."

*Steve Craig, registered nurse, critical care, Cancer Treatment Centers of America at Southeastern Regional Medical Center*

## Take names

"Keep a sheet of paper and a pen near your hospital bed and write down the name and position of everyone who comes into your room. That way, you can say, 'Jane Doe, the nurse practitioner with cardiology, said I might need an echocardiogram.' Whenever something comes to mind that you want to ask your doctor, write that down, too."

*Andrea Lackman, nurse practitioner in the cardiology department at Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, FL*



## DO THE RIGHT RESEARCH

"It's great to inform yourself by doing research online, but some of the information there is off the wall. If you want to look something up, I recommend MedlinePlus ([medlineplus.gov](http://medlineplus.gov)). That's the National Institutes of Health website, and it's full of up-to-date, accurate information about diseases, conditions, and wellness."

*Berenice Dooley, primary care nurse practitioner, Cobleskill, NY*

## Download a first-aid app

"The American Red Cross First Aid app ([redcross.org/apps](http://redcross.org/apps)) provides clear directions on what to do for everything from anaphylaxis to a snakebite. There's also a hospital locator so you can find help quickly if you're traveling."

*Adelita Cantu, associate professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio*



## REAL-LIFE ADVICE

### Get the off-hours phone number

"Ask your health care provider what number to call if you have questions or concerns after hours or on weekends, and find out who will be answering the calls."

*Sara Todd, registered nurse, MercyCare Health Partners*

### Seek a second opinion

"If you're diagnosed with a serious illness like cancer, have your pathology report sent to a comprehensive cancer center or another expert provider. This is your life, and you have every right to a second opinion."

*Laurie Musial, assistant vice president for clinical research administration at Roswell Park Cancer Institute*