



CALIFORNIA'S
VALUED TRUST

Healthcare Benefits for the Education Community

This document is part of California's Valued Trust (CVT) educational series

Be Informed. Be involved.

Know your health care choices.

This informational series is a resource to help you get good quality health care. For more resources, visit our Web site at www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved.

1 Using information about quality to help make decisions about which treatment is best

Example #1

"I was very upset and discouraged when my doctor gave me the bad news about cancer. I had so many questions and concerns.

The nurse at my doctor's office told me about a guide on a government website called *Next steps after diagnosis: finding information and support*. I found it at www.ahrq.gov/consumer/diaginfo.htm. It has a step-by-step approach on what to do, and lots of places to find good information.

I found information that helped me understand my type of cancer. It told about research on what kinds of treatment seem to work the best, and I talked it over with my doctor.

I was glad I took the time to look up that information. Otherwise, I might have rushed into doing something that wasn't right for me."

If you are sick, you want to get care that is based on the latest medical evidence about what types of care work best. You can play an active role in your health care by seeking information that tells about your condition and about what diagnostic tests and treatments work best. This information will help you understand your choices and be better prepared to talk about them with your doctor.



Look for these resources at the CVT Web site

www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved

- "How do we know which types of health care work best?"
- "Health information on the internet: A checklist to help you judge which websites to trust."

- “A list of recommended websites that have trustworthy health information.”

The U.S. government Agency for Health Care Research and Quality has produced summaries for patients that tell about effective health treatments for selected conditions (effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov). These summaries are based on expert reviews of medical research.

Cochrane Collaboration is an international not-for-profit and independent organization that reviews medical studies about health care treatments. The website www.cochrane.org has summaries of the findings of its reviews in the *Cochrane Library*.

Look for this booklet at a website sponsored by the National Cancer Institute (www.cancer.gov): “Taking time: support for people with cancer.” Written for people with cancer and their families, it discusses feelings and concerns, and offers suggestions for coping.

2 Using information about quality to keep from using treatment that doesn't help

Scientific studies of patient care are done to find out which types of treatment work well for a particular condition and which do not. Every year, new medical research studies are done and there can be updates to what is known about which treatments work best.

Sometimes there are surprises. For example, research might show that a widely used treatment is not actually effective. When this happens, treatment recommendations can change. There's an example below:

“Example #2

When my son got an ear infection, I was expecting that he would be on antibiotics, but the doctor said no, he doesn't need them. I couldn't believe it at first.

The doctor said there's been research and now the recommended treatment for ear infections has changed. They used to use antibiotics for most ear infections, but now they don't.

The doctor gave me a brochure. It says that most ear infections are caused by viruses, and antibiotics won't help. And if you take antibiotics too often when you don't need them, then

antibiotics don't work as well later on when you really do need them.”

Knowing which treatments work well and which do not can help you stay away from treatments that do not work well. If there is evidence from patient research that shows a certain treatment won't help you get better, then why waste your time and money on that treatment?



To learn more about when antibiotics are needed and when they are not, visit the website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (often called “the CDC”). This website includes a information series called “Get smart: Use antibiotics wisely” at www.cdc.gov/drugresistance/community.

3 Using information about quality to get good quality surgical care that is as safe as possible

Example #3

If you are having surgery, be sure that you understand why the surgery is needed and what you should expect – before, during, and after the operation.

- Since most operations are not emergencies, you will usually have time to learn about your operation to be sure it is the best treatment for you.
- You also have time to choose a good surgeon and work with your surgeon to make the surgery as safe as possible.



Here are resources to help you get good quality surgical care that is as safe as possible:

- *Having Surgery? What You Need to Know*, a patient guide prepared by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (www.ahrq.gov/consumer/surgery/surgery.htm).
- The website of the American College of Surgeons has patient information (www.facs.org/public_info/ppserv.html). Topics include choosing a surgeon, getting a second opinion, questions to ask when you are having surgery, and information about a number of common operations.
- For a series of patient safety brochures on topics that include how to prevent mistakes in surgery and medical tests, visit www.jointcommission.org/PatientSafety/SpeakUp).
- The federal government website called *Hospital Compare*

(www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov) has information about the quality of hospitals throughout the United States. This includes surgical infection rates and other information relevant for hospital patients who have surgery.

4 Using information about quality to see if your care meets the standards for good quality care

Example #4

“I have diabetes, and I thought I was doing everything I should do to stay healthy.

Then I read a booklet with standards of good quality care for people with diabetes. I found out that I wasn’t getting some tests I need to have as often as I should.

So I made an appointment right away. Now I’m up to date on everything. I’m even keeping track of all my tests on a wallet card.

I don’t want to fall behind again. My health is too important.”

If you have an ongoing medical condition such as asthma, diabetes, arthritis, heart disease, or high blood pressure, then you know it’s especially important to look after your health.

Much research has been done to find ways to help people with ongoing conditions stay as healthy as possible. The results from this research have been used to set **quality of care standards for people with ongoing conditions**. These guidelines tell what types of care you should be getting to catch problems at an early stage and prevent serious complications.

If you have an ongoing health condition, you’ll want to be sure that the care you are getting follows these guidelines for quality care. This means finding and using information about the quality standards for your condition.



Look for these tip sheets at the CVT Web site
www.cvtrust.org/resources/beinformedbeinvolved:

- “Good quality care: what it is and why you can’t take it for granted.”
- “Information about health care quality: what it is and where to find it.”

5 Using information about quality to keep up on preventive care and help stay healthy

Example #5

“My doctor showed me statistics on how being overweight can lead to big health problems -- that got my attention. Then he gave me advice about healthy eating and sent me to some government websites.

One of them has a Body Mass Index calculator that’s quick and easy to use (www.cdc.gov).

The one I like best is the “Portion Distortion Quiz” on the website of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. It shows how portion sizes of some common foods have become a lot bigger over the years (<http://hp2010.nhlbi.nih.net/portion/>). It made me realize what huge helpings I’m used to eating.”



The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force has used evidence from research to set guidelines for screening tests, preventive medicine, and healthy lifestyle behaviors. These guidelines tell what you can do to help stay healthy.

- The guidelines are shown in a new pocket-size brochure called *Stay Healthy at Any Age, Your Checklist for Health*. The brochure is in English and Spanish, with separate versions for women and men. You can get these brochures from a government website run by the Agency for Healthcare Quality and Research (www.ahrq.gov/clinic/ppipix.htm) or by calling 1-800-358-9295.
- The brochures give you the details about which screening tests you need and when you need them. They have a chart to help you keep track of the tests you’ve had and to plan for when you will need them again.
- The brochures also have tips about other things to do to stay healthy, such as eating a healthy diet and exercising.

6 Using information about quality to help find a new doctor

Example #6

“When I moved, I had to find a new doctor. A neighbor told me about a government website at www.ahrq.gov/consumers that tells things to consider when you’re picking a doctor. It also tells how to look up a doctor’s training and experience.

When I had the names of several doctors who looked promising, I took the website’s advice and called their offices. I used a list of questions from the website to ask about certain things that are important to me.

There were such big differences. One office said that waiting time for routine appointments was at least six weeks, and that didn’t sound good. Another office said that if I wanted to talk about test results, I’d have to make an appointment – they wouldn’t do it over the phone. But another office had regular call-in hours set aside for patients so they could talk with a nurse or maybe even with the doctor.

It took some time and a bit of courage to make those calls, but I was glad I did. I found a new doctor I’m very happy with.”



The following resources can help you find information about the qualifications of doctors and other health professionals:

- For information about licensed doctors in the United States, visit the website of the American Medical Association. Click on “For patients” to access “DoctorFinder” (www.ama-assn.org).
- For information from state government licensing boards on the licensing background and disciplinary information of doctors and other health care providers, click on “DocFinder” at www.docboard.org.

7 Using information about quality to help choose a nursing home for a parent

Example #7

“The doctor said my father needed to be in a nursing home, so it was up to me to find a good one. I didn’t know where to start.

The doctor said I should look at a website called “Nursing Home Compare” at

www.medicare.gov/NHcompare. It's run by the government and so helpful. There's a checklist on what to look for when you visit a nursing home and questions you should ask. It has quality ratings for each nursing home. It even has the results from official inspection reports of each nursing home.

When I was using this website, I saw that the nursing home my friends had recommended didn't do well on the quality ratings. So I kept looking and I found a better one. It's for my father, after all. I want him to have the very best care."



For reports with quality comparisons, visit the following government websites where you can compare the quality of care within a state, county, city, or zip code.

- For hospital care: www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov
- For nursing home care: www.medicare.gov/NHCompare (this website is described in the example above)
- For home health care www.medicare.gov/HHCompare
- For kidney dialysis facilities: www.Medicare.gov/dialysis

To help find reports with quality comparisons for health care organizations in the local area, look for this directory on the employee website (www.employees.com/healthinfo) *Directory of reports that show quality comparisons of health plans, hospitals, and medical groups in our community.*

Source: These materials were adapted from the *Communication Toolkit: Using information to get high quality care*. The American Institutes for Research developed the Toolkit materials with funding from the California HealthCare Foundation. The National Business Group on Health maintains and host the Toolkit website.