

The Facts About... Medical Errors

**Deaths Caused by Medical Errors Among
Leading Causes of Death, 2000**



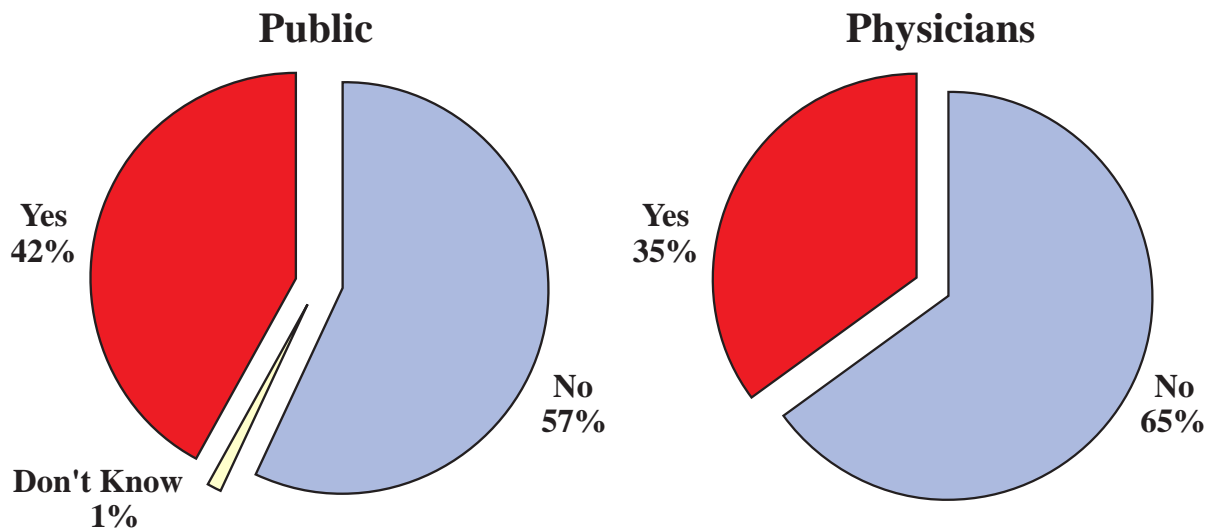
Source: United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Institute of Medicine

Medical errors are one of the leading causes of death and injury in the United States, according to the Agency for Health Care Research and Quality. An estimated 44,000 to 98,000 people die in U.S. hospitals each year due to medical errors, according to the Institute of Medicine. An error is defined as the failure of a planned action to be completed as intended or the use of a wrong plan to achieve an aim. Medical errors can occur in hospitals, clinics, surgery centers, doctors' offices, nursing homes, pharmacies, and patient's homes. Errors can involve medicines, surgery, diagnosis, equipment, and lab reports. Most errors result from today's complex health system, but then also occur when doctors and their patients have problems communicating.

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Personal Experience with Medical Errors

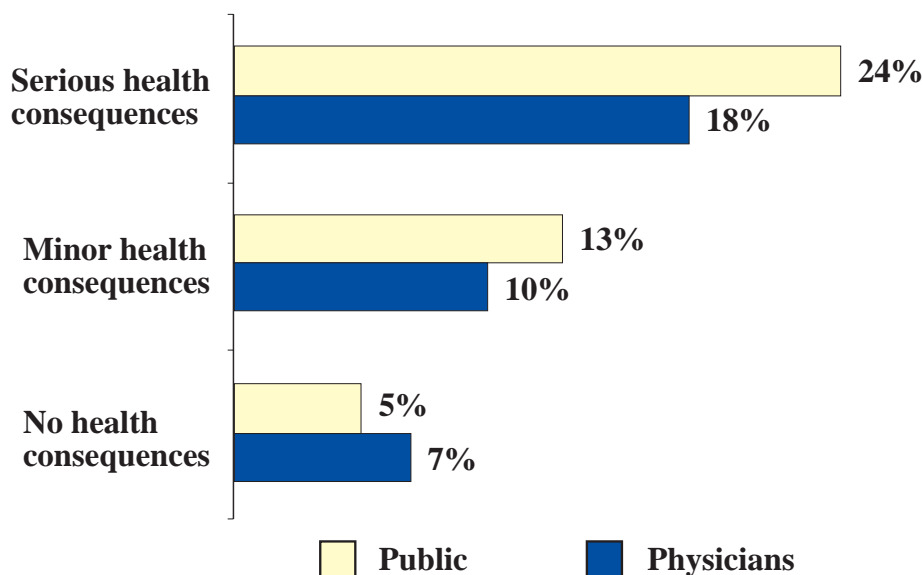
The percentage who said they have been personally involved in a situation where a preventable medical error was made in their own medical care or that of a family member.



Source: Harvard School of Public Health / Kaiser Family Foundation, "Medical Errors: Practicing Physician and Public Views," Published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, December 12, 2002; surveys conducted April-July 2002.
Note: Earlier in the survey the public and physicians were read a common definition of medical errors.

Health Consequences of Medical Errors

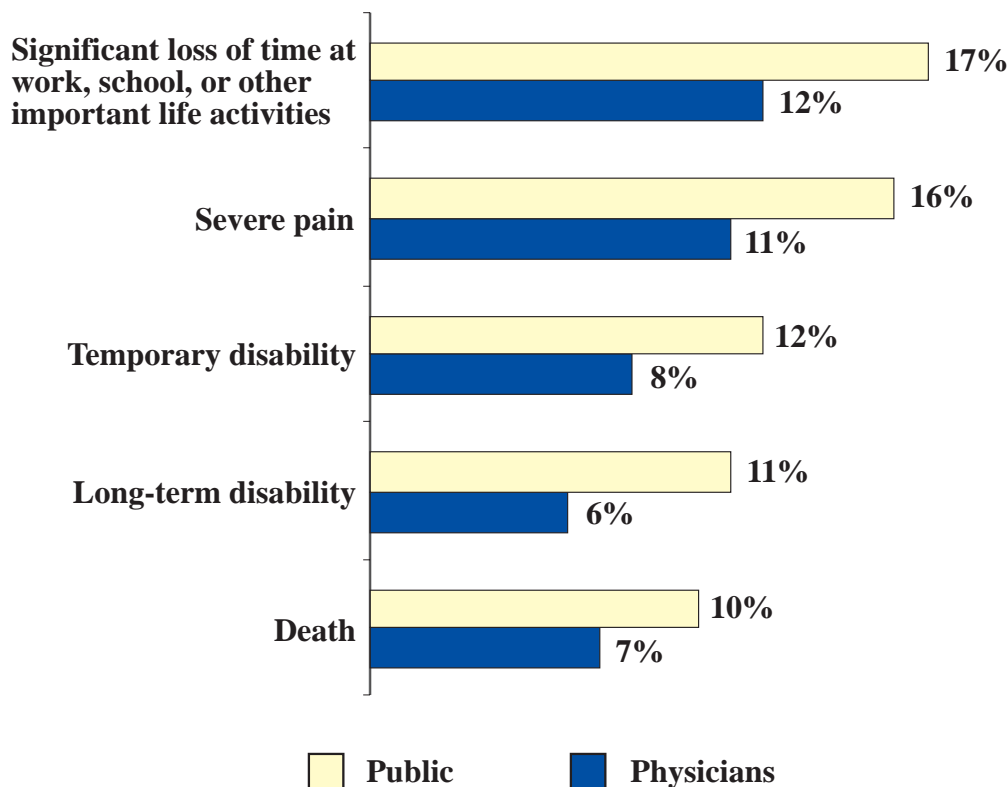
Among the general public and physicians, the percentage who experienced a medical error that resulted in...



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Results of Medical Errors with Serious Health Consequences

Among the general public and physicians, the percentage who have experienced serious health consequences due to a medical error which included...



*Source: Harvard School of Public Health / Kaiser Family Foundation, "Medical Errors: Practicing Physician and Public Views," Published in The New England Journal of Medicine, December 12, 2002; surveys conducted April-July 2002.
Note: Earlier in the survey the public and physicians were read a common definition of medical errors.*

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What are the Types of Medical Errors?

Types of Medical Errors

Diagnostic

- Error or delay in diagnosis
- Failure to employ indicated tests
- Use of outmoded tests or therapy
- Failure to act on results of monitoring or testing

Treatment

- Error in the performance of an operation, procedure, or test
- Error in administering the treatment
- Error in the dose or method of using a drug
- Avoidable delay in treatment or in responding to an abnormal test
- Inappropriate (not indicated) care

Preventive

- Failure to provide prophylactic treatment
- Inadequate monitoring or follow-up of treatment

Other

- Failure of communication
- Equipment failure
- Other system failure

Source: Institute of Medicine in [To Err is Human](#)



What are the Costs Associated with Medical Errors?

According to the Institute of Medicine medical errors cost the nation approximately \$37.6 billion each year. About \$17 billion of these costs are associated with preventable errors. Nearly half of the \$17 billion goes toward direct health care costs. According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, errors in health care have been estimated to cost more than \$5 million per year in a large teaching hospital.

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What Do Experts Say Patients Can Do To Help Prevent Medical Errors?

1. The single most important way you can help to prevent errors is to be an active member of your health care team.

Medicines:

2. Make sure all of your doctors know about everything you are taking. This includes prescription and over-the-counter medicines, and dietary supplements such as vitamins and herbs.
3. Make sure your doctor knows about any allergies and adverse reactions you have had to medicines.
4. When your doctor writes you a prescription, make sure you can read it.
5. Ask for information about your medicines in terms that you can understand both when your medicines are prescribed and when you receive them.
6. When you pick up your medicine from the pharmacy, ask: Is this the medicine my doctor prescribed?
7. If you have any questions about the directions on your medicine labels, ask.
8. Ask your pharmacist for the best device to measure your liquid medicine. Also, ask questions if you're not sure how to use it.
9. Ask for written information about the side effects your medicine could cause.

Hospital Stays:

10. If you have a choice, choose a hospital at which many patients have the procedure or surgery you need.
11. If you are in a hospital, consider asking all health care workers who have direct contact with you whether they have washed their hands.
12. When you are being discharged from the hospital, ask your doctor to explain the treatment plan you will use at home.

Surgery:

13. If you are having surgery, make sure that you, your doctor, and your surgeon all agree and are clear on exactly what will be done.

Other steps you can take:

14. Speak up if you have questions or concerns.
15. Make sure that someone, such as your personal doctor, is in charge of your care.
16. Make sure that all health professionals involved in your care have important health information about you.
17. Ask a family member or friend to be there with you and to be your advocate.
18. Know that "more" is not always better.
19. If you have a test, don't assume that no news is good news.
20. Learn about your condition and treatments by asking your doctor and nurse and by using other reliable sources.

Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

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How to Improve and Promote Patient Safety

According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, dispensing medicines by computer, hiring more nurses and making sure patients better understand their treatments are ways that hospitals can reduce medical errors. The agency reviewed 79 patient safety practices and found that 73 are likely to improve patient safety, but are not performed routinely in the nation's hospitals and nursing homes. Among the highly proven practices are giving patients antibiotics just before surgery to prevent infections; using ultrasound to help guide the insertion of central intravenous lines and prevent punctured arteries and other complications; and giving surgery patients beta blockers to prevent heart attacks during or after the operation. The agency also found that only 13 percent of 500 hospitals said they used electronic prescriptions systems.



Some Useful Websites for Information on Medical Errors

- [Medscape Resource center - Medical Errors/Patient Safety](#)
- [American Psychological Association - Medical Errors and Patient Safety](#)
- [101 Ways to Prevent Medical Errors](#)