

The Emergency Medical File Every Caregiver Should Create

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Many seniors have chronic medical conditions that must be closely monitored and for which they take any number of prescription medications. Family caregivers tend to get a crash course in nursing and managing medical care once they begin helping an aging loved one, and the biggest lesson many learn initially is that organization is key. This is especially true when a senior develops a need for urgent medical care.

As medical director of MyCareClinic at The Carlisle Naples, a senior community offering both independent and assisted living in Southwest Florida, and an urgent care physician at ER QuickCare, Dr. Carlos Paisan is no stranger to the complex medical issues that seniors navigate on a daily basis.

In addition to openly communicating with your loved one's primary care physician (PCP) and knowing where the nearest walk-in clinics and hospitals are located, Dr. Paisan recommends that caregivers and seniors create an emergency "packet" of medical information that can be given to paramedics, emergency room staff, and urgent care clinicians.

"At The Carlisle, there is an envelope on the back of each resident's door containing an exact list of their medications and dosages, a copy of their power of attorney, contact information for their doctors, and information relevant to any chronic conditions," Dr. Paisan explains. "Paramedics know this information is there, so they can pick up this packet with everything they need and go. I think this is a great practice to adopt in any home, especially if you're responsible for the care of an elderly person."

Such a packet is actually quite simple to put together, since it contains copies of information that caregivers should have on file already. Dr. Paisan's suggestions for assembling your own emergency file are detailed below.

Build Your Own Emergency Medical Folder

1. Medications

Include a list of all of a senior's prescription and over-the-counter medications, their exact dosages, and how frequently they are taken.

"One of the biggest problems I see in the urgent care clinic," says Dr. Paisan, "is that patients don't know or remember exactly what medications they're taking. They'll say they take a 'water pill' or 'blood pressure pill.' There are a lot of medications that interact with each other, so detailed information can be a lifesaver."

2. Allergies

If your loved one is allergic to any medications, additives, preservatives or materials like latex or adhesives, be sure to include a list of these things and the severity of their reaction.

3. Doctors

Include the name and contact information for the patient's primary care physician. If your loved one sees any specialists regularly for chronic conditions, such as a cardiologist or a gastroenterologist, provide their contact information as well.

4. Medical Conditions

Provide general information about more serious physical and mental conditions and medical history. For example, diabetes, dementia, and past cardiovascular and cerebrovascular events (with dates) are all important information to include.

5. Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) Order

If a senior does not wish to receive cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) or intubation in the event of cardiac or respiratory arrest, be sure to include a copy of their state-sponsored and physician-signed DNR order or Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) form. (POLST forms are more comprehensive than a basic DNR but are only available in some states.)

6. Medical POA

If the senior has appointed you or someone else as their medical power of attorney, make sure a copy of this legal document is included in their packet. This is crucial for communicating with medical staff and making healthcare decisions.

7. Most Recent Labs

Including copies of a senior's most recent laboratory tests can be very helpful for physicians who are trying to make a diagnosis and decide on a course of treatment without a complete medical history to reference. "Pertinent labs, like most recent EKGs, complete blood counts, and kidney function and liver function tests can set benchmarks that help physicians a lot," Dr. Paisan points out. "These are basic tests, but they take time when you're in the emergency room feeling badly while and waiting for answers."

8. Insurance Information

Include copies of all up-to-date insurance cards. This information can help ensure your loved one's medical care is billed correctly from the start, even if their original cards are left behind in the rush to the hospital or clinic.

9. Photo Identification

While emergency rooms must treat patients regardless of whether they have identification or insurance information, many urgent care centers typically require a picture ID to see patients. Include a copy of the senior's driver's license (or ID card if they do not drive) in the folder to avoid any problems.

Using the Emergency Medical Folder

Once you have gathered the records, copied them and assembled the folder, put it in an easily accessible place. If you share caregiving responsibilities with other family members, friends or

professional in-home caregivers, inform them of this file's existence and location. "Put that collection of information where everybody can find it," Dr. Paisan urges.

This packet should be given to paramedics responding to 911 calls, and it should be brought along to walk-ins at the emergency room or urgent care clinic. In the latter cases, Dr. Paisan recommends giving the information to a staff member who is going to have direct patient contact with the senior instead of a receptionist whose only job is to check people in. "This could be a triage nurse, the actual nurse on duty once the patient is put into a room, or the physician who is in charge of their care."

For seniors who attend day programs or spend ample time in their family members' homes, having one of these folders available in each location isn't a bad idea, either. Remember to update the contents of each folder as needed, though. Speak with their adult day care or senior center to see if they are able to keep the packet on file in case of emergencies. Dr. Paisan notes that, "When this detailed information is handy, it makes life easier and safer for everybody involved."