

Accreditation

Accreditation is another measurement that can be used to indicate quality. Accreditation is a “seal of approval” given by a private, independent group. Health care organizations choose whether to participate in accreditation programs. These organizations — such as hospitals, outpatient facilities and nursing homes — must meet national standards to earn accreditation. These standards include clinical performance measures related to the quality of care they deliver.

Two of the national groups that award accreditations include:

- **The Joint Commission** (www.jointcommission.org), which surveys hospitals and other medical facilities throughout the United States.
- **National Committee for Quality Assurance** (www.ncqa.org), which rates health plans and lists recognition earned by physicians across the country.

Consumer Ratings

Consumer ratings also are called customer satisfaction ratings. They tell you what other patients think about the care they received. Consumer groups publish guides to hospitals and other

facilities in various cities. Find out what kind of ratings are available where you live by calling your state department of health or hospital association.

Improving Health Care Quality

The goal for the future is to make quality measures more uniform, reliable and easily accessible. Many public and private groups are working to improve health care quality, quality measures and other tools. According to a recent *National Healthcare Quality Report* published by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), quality is improving in many areas of the country. But change takes time. Throughout the years to come, each of us has an important role to play to improve health care quality.

Work with your doctor to determine your level of risk for a particular condition. Find out which types of screenings and tests you should have. Health care measures are set as general standards for a broad population. That means all general treatment recommendations may not apply to you.

Remember that quality matters, especially when it comes to your health. For more information on health care quality and how to make smart decisions, visit *My Health Toolkit*SM on our Web site or visit the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association’s Web site at www.bcbs.com.



The quality of the health care you receive can help you stay healthy or recover faster when you become ill. Some consumers may not receive the highest quality care they deserve. You can avoid being one of them.

Quality

You can take important steps to ensure you receive quality care by understanding how to identify and seek out quality treatment and services.

Quality Transparency

Quality means different things to different people. No matter how we define it, there is no doubt that clinical quality of care is critical to our health and the health of our families. But what exactly is health care quality? And how do we know if we are receiving it? The answer is directly related to how much information we gather prior to receiving services.

Improving quality is a team effort. As the patient, you are at the center of that team. Success also relies on every part of the health care system. Health care providers, insurance companies, the government and many other groups in this country are working hard to improve health care quality. You have an important role to play to ensure you and your family members receive the best quality care possible.

Quality health care is defined as doing the right thing, for the right patient, at the right time and in the right way to achieve the best possible results. In other words, getting the care you need when you need it, using the right services to achieve a positive outcome.

Variations in Health Care Quality

Health care quality varies in this country. Sometimes, it depends on where you live and where you seek care. Some providers do a better job than others of helping you stay healthy or get better if you are ill. When you make health care decisions that lead you to the best possible care, you are most likely to get the best possible results.

So when it comes to making major health care decisions — about health plans, doctors, treatments, hospitals and long-term care — how can you tell which choices offer

quality health care and which do not? New ways to measure and report on the quality of health care are being developed each year. This data is publicly available to help you make decisions that improve the quality of the care you receive.

While additional data is still needed, more tools and resources are available today than ever before. It is important to know that different quality reports measure different aspects of care. And different sources provide the data used in different reports. That means that you cannot compare two quality reports, since you risk “comparing apples to oranges.” As you review quality information, be sure to identify the source of the data used in the report.

Quality Measures

Health care professionals use various health care quality measures to identify and improve the quality of care they provide. Science-based measures are used to judge quality for some medical conditions and types of care. These measures set standards for screenings, immunizations and other preventive care. Measures also define specific services that should be provided to patients who have, or are at risk for, certain medical conditions.

Other ways to measure health care quality are through report cards, accreditations, clinical performance measures and consumer ratings. Some of this quality information is publicly available to help you compare your health care choices.

Finding Quality Information Online

As an advocate for quality health, BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina can help you compare the care provided

by hospitals in your area. Visit our Web site to review quality information through the Review Hospital Profiles tool. Information is available for many conditions and types of treatments. Data includes:

- Number of patients treated.
- Complication and mortality rates.
- Average lengths of stay.
- Other evaluations, such as safety surveys.

Other steps BlueCross is taking to increase collection and availability of quality data include:

- Participating in national initiatives on quality and cost transparency, including:
 - Blue DistinctionSM Hospital Measurement and Improvement Program.
 - Blue Distinction Centers of Excellence for transplants, bariatric surgery, cardiac care and cancer care.
- Improving existing Hospital and Physician Recognition programs that reward high quality.
- Measuring and reporting quality measures on numerous factors, for example cancer screening rates.
- Finalizing plans to publish performance indicators for participating providers.

Quality Report Cards

A variety of information, including clinical performance, is measured in quality reports. These report cards can help you select the right treatment and the right provider based on what factors are most important to you. Several government and independent agencies publish quality reports and other information.

- **The Leapfrog Group** is an independent company dedicated to improving the safety, quality and affordability of health care. It encourages providers to publicly report outcomes so that consumers can make informed choices. Check out the hospital ratings at www.leapfroggroup.org.

- **The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services** offers an online quality comparison tool available at www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov.
- **The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS)** offers numerous initiatives to improve the care provided by our nation's hospitals. It makes quality information available to consumers on its Web site at www.cms.hhs.gov.
- **Bridges To Excellence** is a not-for-profit organization. It encourages physicians to deliver safer, more effective and efficient care by giving them financial and other incentives to do so. Visit www.bridgestoexcellence.org. (Note: While its programs are expanding across the country, Bridges to Excellence is not yet available in all states.)
- If you need help finding quality reports, accreditation reports or other types of quality information, **check with your local library**, or your local or state health department.



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