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## How to Prepare for a Medical Emergency

Organization is power. Take time to whip your medical information into shape now, and set yourself and your family up for a healthier future.

By **Naomi Barr**

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In an [emergency](#), sharing crucial health facts with medical professionals (stat!) can help them make swift, informed decisions that could save your life—or a loved one's. But just-in-case isn't the only reason to put your records in order. Studies show that people who actively keep track of their [personal health information](#) are more likely to eat well and exercise regularly; to have standout test results, such as lower BMI, blood pressure, and [cholesterol levels](#); and to report positive medical experiences, including better communication with their doctors and [better health outcomes](#). "The more complete a story you can tell about your health or that of your child, the more likely you'll get the best possible care from a doctor," says [Natasha Burgert, MD](#), a pediatrician in Overland Park, Kansas, and national spokesperson for the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#). Try these tactics to pin down all your details.

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## Put Doctors on Speed Dial

If you can't remember the name of the endocrinologist who checked your [thyroid levels](#) three years ago, join the club. "When you don't see a doctor very often, it's easy to forget her name, even for a fellow practitioner like me," says Dr. Burgert. Make a list of your providers' names, specialties, and phone numbers, and post it on a pinboard in your kitchen or office, or store it on your phone. "I keep mine under the contact 'Doctors,'" she says. "Then, in the notes section, I list each one individually." She suggests putting pediatrician under kids' names (as in "Jill's Doctors"). If you use your provider's or hospital system's patient portal, add the website, and store usernames and passwords in a password manager.

## Take Down Your Family History

It's not an arduous project, we promise. Just call your parents, grandparents, and siblings and ask for details you don't know offhand, such as [cases of cancer](#), diabetes, [high blood pressure](#), heart disease, stroke, and conditions diagnosed at a young age; then put them in a document. A simple typed-up list works fine, or try the U.S. surgeon general's free [My Family Health Portrait](#) tool. [AncestryHealth](#) also offers one to its subscribers. Store it along with your personal health records (more on those in a minute)

in a way that's easy for you to access and share, be it paper or digital. If you prefer the former, Dr. Burgert recommends a three-ring binder with dividers, which is much easier to keep in chronological order and bring to an appointment than loose file folders. To go digital, try a cloud-based file-sharing program, such as Google Drive, says [Davis Liu, MD](#), a Sacramento, California-based family physician and chief clinical officer of the telemedicine service [Lemonaid Health](#). If you're managing a loved one's care, organizing her info in a cloud-based version is particularly useful, he adds.

[Related: Everything You Need to Know About At-Home DNA Tests](#)

## Fill in Your Details

Include everything you'd tell a new doctor or want a loved one to know in case of an emergency. If all your providers use the same patient portal, it may contain everything you need; if they use different ones, and you have an iPhone, "consider using the Apple Health app," suggests Dr. Liu. For participating doctors' offices and healthcare systems, it consolidates [electronic health records](#) into one user-friendly location.

Make sure to record your significant current or past conditions, how they were or are being treated, doctor visits, and any surgeries or accidents that required medical attention, says [Dara Richardson-Heron, MD](#), chief patient officer at the pharmaceutical company Pfizer. If you had an appendectomy in your teens but don't remember exactly when, that's fine—just note that you had one. Request copies of results from scans, blood or urine tests, screenings, and any hospital-discharge summaries from [your doctors' offices](#). (These are especially handy to have if you switch providers. Potential fees vary by state; electronic versions tend to cost less.)

Make a list of your current prescription medications, including the dosage, how often you take it, and the reason you're on it, since some can be prescribed for more than one purpose, says [Kathryn Boling, MD](#), a family-medicine physician with Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore. Be sure to [note any allergies and your symptoms](#), notes Dr. Liu. Last but not least, log your vitamins and [supplements](#), since some can interact with prescription drugs. What's not necessary: detailed notes from every doctor visit going back years—and, surprisingly, your blood type. "If you need blood, they're not going to just take your word for it; they'll check your type or give you O-negative, the universal donor," says Dr. Boling.

## Carry an Emergency Card

"It can be just a small typed-up sheet listing your name, date of birth, medical conditions, surgeries and the ballpark age you had them, allergies to medications, emergency contacts, and main doctors and their phone numbers," says Dr. Liu. (Do the same for kids, adding their [immunization history](#) and height and weight.) Tuck it in a wallet or backpack—which a Good Samaritan or first responder might check before a phone—and update as needed. If you have an iPhone, fill out and enable the "Medical ID" section on the Health app, too; it can be accessed without keying in your passcode.

[Related: Six Seemingly Unimportant Symptoms to Always Tell Your Doctor About](#)

## Stay on Schedule

To manage preventive visits—like seeing your [primary-care provider](#) or [getting a mammogram](#)—as easily as your health records, book them during the month of your birthday, suggests Dr. Boling, who got the tip from a patient: "It's a great idea because it works." For tests you need less frequently, such as a Pap or colonoscopy, do as Dr. Burgert does, and always book the next one before you leave the office, even if it's a few years off: "That way my future appointment is in their system, and I don't have to worry." Arrange to see your dentist early in the year; if your insurance covers two annual visits, you can go back if needed before December. And set your phone to remind you every October 1 to get a flu shot; [flu season](#) typically starts later in the month, and the vaccine can take about two weeks to become fully effective. For a guide to key appointments, tear out our handy chart on the previous page, and take charge of your well-being, one checkup at a time.

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