

What is a Hospitalist?

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When I tell people that I am a doctor who works as a hospitalist, the response I often get is, "What's a hospitalist?"

A hospitalist is a doctor who specializes in caring for patients in the hospital. I do not have an office practice. At Southwestern Vermont Medical Center (SVMC), there are 12 hospitalists on staff. All of us are general internal medicine physicians. This is a doctor who specializes in the diagnosis, management, and nonsurgical treatment of diseases and illnesses. Some of us have additional subspecialty training, such as my colleagues who are also board certified in nephrology and infectious disease.

The next questions I am usually asked are, "Why a hospitalist? What benefits are there to being seen by a hospitalist while in the hospital?"

Many hospitals across the country are employing hospitalists because of the benefits to their patients. For one thing, a member of the hospitalist team is always in the hospital and readily available for emergencies. We do not have offices in an outside building, so we are easily accessible to patients and their families. We can call in specialists if they are needed, but overall we are onsite to answer questions, follow-up on tests, and adjust a patient's treatment as needed.

Our goal is not to replace someone's regular doctor, but rather to work very closely with him or her. Because hospitalists are in the hospital all day, primary care doctors can spend more time with other patients in their offices. It helps avoid delays and interruptions in their schedules. It also offers them peace of mind because they don't have to worry about rushing to the hospital to see a patient.

We communicate often with our patients' regular doctors. We contact the patient's primary care doctor when a patient is admitted to get the patient's health information and records. We connect with primary care doctors much in the same way that a specialist does when you see one for another opinion.

As long as a patient is in the hospital, the hospitalist team and the patient's regular doctor continue to touch base about his or her care. We discuss a patient's condition and treatment plan. We go over medications and any previous or chronic conditions. Some doctors still like to visit their hospitalized patients during the day, but leave their care in our hands during the night. Communication remains open no matter how often a patient's regular doctor can visit in person.

When one of our patients leaves the hospital, we call the primary care doctor to discuss further treatment needs, arrange follow-up care, and prescribe medications. We also send the patient's hospital records to the primary care doctor. Our hospital patients are also advised to make an appointment to see their primary care doctor one or two days after leaving the hospital.

As you can probably tell, life as a hospitalist involves medical expertise and lots of communication with patients, their families and their doctors. If you or a family member are ever in the hospital and are seen by hospitalists, know that they are there to ensure you receive the best in hospital medical care.

Dr. Nancy Schuster is medical director for the hospitalist program at Southwestern Vermont Medical Center. "Health Matters" is a weekly column meant to educate readers about their personal health, public health matters, and public policy as it affects health care.