Prevention is critical. With a growing number of Americans visiting emergency departments one or more times each year, wait times are getting much longer. Work with your primary care provider to proactively manage your conditions to avoid the need for emergency care.

Ask questions. Make sure you understand your health conditions, your doctor’s recommendations and how to follow treatment plans before leaving the hospital. If you don’t understand, ask questions until you do. Doctors, nurses and other hospital staff are there to help you.

Stick to your treatment plan. Following recommendations, physical therapy regimens and directions for taking medications will help keep you healthy and avoid returning to the hospital.

Keep your primary care provider in the know. When you leave the hospital, ask the nurse if a summary can be sent to your primary care doctor. He or she can help you understand what you need to do to feel better, and ensure that your medical record is up to date.

Don’t go it alone. While at the hospital, have a friend or family member listen, take notes and help you understand what your doctors and nurses say about caring for your condition.