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How to Pack Extended Ho

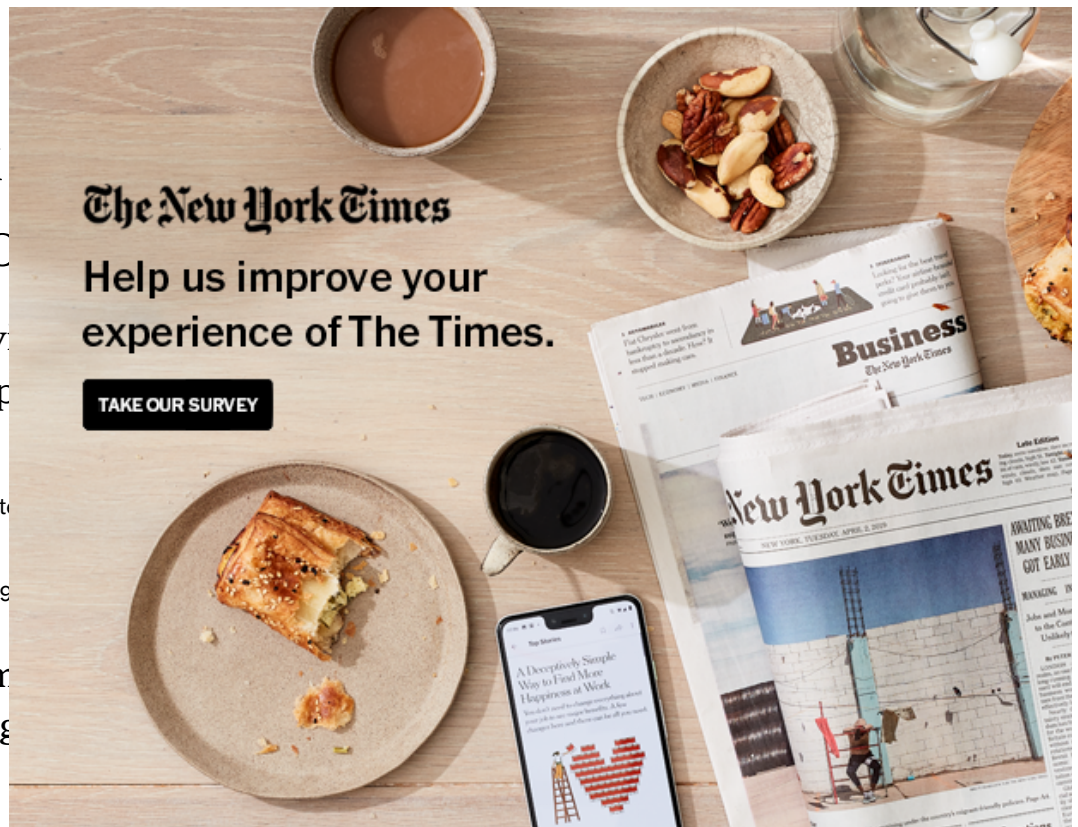
For frequent hospital v
entertainment can help

By Sarah Witman

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York Times Company.

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When an ambulance came
wasn't time to pack a bag
vehicle in her car.



A previous stroke had left Ms. Goyer's mother mostly uncommunicative, and her father's dementia made it hard for him to recall important details. They were both counting on their daughter to field questions from her mother's doctors.

"There's a sense of panic and urgency," Ms. Goyer, now 59 and a resident of Arizona, said. "You have one thing on your mind, and that's getting there."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 8 percent of Americans had to spend a night in the hospital in 2018. Meanwhile, according to the American Psychological Association, as of 2016, nearly one-third of Americans have cared for an elderly, ill, or disabled family member. Many of those people may, at some point, require hospitalization.

If you have a chronic illness that requires frequent hospital visits, or you're caring for an ailing family member, consider packing a "go bag" that you can grab on your way out the door. Ms. Goyer, who is AARP's caregiving expert, and has personally seen her parents and sister

through numerous hospitalizations, said certain items can make the experience more bearable.

“Creature comforts are very important in the healing process,” she said. “You might think it’s all about the medicine and surgical procedures, but it’s not. It’s about feeling safe, secure, comforted, loved, and supported.”

Comfortable clothes and bedding

Not all hospitals will let you bring your own bedding, but if you can, Ms. Goyer said, the feel and smell of your own pillow or a blanket from home can be a huge source of comfort.

“I had this really nice, soft, fuzzy blanket that I started bringing along for my mom,” she said.

Hospitals are often cold, she said, which some studies suggest may make it harder for your immune system to fight off infection. Pack a robe, slippers, socks, a beanie, and other warm (and comfortable) clothing to regulate your body temperature — in addition to getting plenty of rest and fluids. This is important for patients as well as for caregivers who are spending time in the hospital with them, she said. “The last thing you want is to get sick because you were in the hospital caring for someone else.”

All clothing should be loose and comfortable, so you can get in and out of it easily for IVs or any tests. Label everything with your name, so it doesn’t get lost or forgotten. Pack some clean underwear and a change of clothes for the trip home.

Light entertainment

A hospital stay is probably not the best time to try to tackle “Infinite Jest.” To occupy your mind, bring along something you enjoy — whether it’s a magazine, coloring book, crossword puzzle, knitting, or cross-stitching supplies — that won’t be overly strenuous.

If you have a spare phone, tablet, or hand-held gaming console at home, load it up with games, movies, music, audiobooks, podcasts, comedy specials, or whatever you think will bring you joy. Just don’t forget the chargers. A high-capacity power bank, an extension cord or surge protector, and extra-long charging cables are also useful in case outlets are out of reach. (Here are Wirecutter’s recommendations for the best fast chargers and accessories.)

Anything that will let you sleep

“Sleeping is always one of the most difficult aspects of being at the hospital,” Ms. Goyer said. “And it’s awful because getting good rest is so, so crucial for healing.”

She recommends lavender room spray or lavender essential oil with a diffuser, since lavender aromatherapy may help improve sleep and reduce anxiety (although scientific evidence is inconsistent on either claim, according to a 2014 Cochrane review). At the very least, it probably smells nicer than hospital air. A travel pillow can be useful if you need to sleep while propped up, and an eye mask, earplugs, and headphones can help block out beeping and blinking from medical equipment. If you have a private room (and if it won’t disturb your nurses and doctors), you could also bring a white noise machine (we recommend the LectroFan) or a Bluetooth speaker (our favorite is the UE Wonderboom 2) to play soothing sounds or music.

Think about how you or your loved one likes to sleep at home, Ms. Goyer said: “If they’re used to falling asleep with the TV on, let them do that. Whatever works.”

Surprisingly good snacks

Most hospitals have cafeterias and vending machines, but the food can be bland, unimaginative, and in some cases, unhealthy — especially if you’re eating it day after day. Your favorite nutritional snacks — whether it’s a bottle of cold-pressed juice or a tin of fancy tea bags — can go a long way toward making you or a loved one feel better. Just be sure to run any snacks by hospital staff, since most hospitals have restrictions on outside food and drink.

Some treatments leave a bad taste in patients’ mouths, so pack mints or gum to keep your mouth feeling fresh. And don’t forget a water bottle or tumbler to stay hydrated, which is crucial for healing.

Tools for organization and empowerment

Liwanag Ojala, chief executive of CaringBridge, a service to connect patients and caregivers to other people dealing with an illness, said it’s always a good idea to bring along a list of the patient’s medications and allergies, names and numbers for all the patient’s doctors and specialists, and emergency contacts.

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Ms. Goyer adds that if you're packing for a loved one, it can be helpful to print out multiple copies of essential information: a scan of their insurance card, their medical history, and their advance directive (also called a living will, which you can find on AARP's website). That way, she said, you have the information handy if your phone or laptop dies, and you can give a printout to various doctors and nurses as needed.

If you're tech-savvy, note-taking apps like Evernote or OneNote can be helpful to keep track of doctors' updates and other information. But a paper notepad and pen work just as well, if that's what you're comfortable with. With permission from the doctor, a voice recorder (or a recording app on your phone) can also be helpful for going back to conversations after you've had some time to mentally process. Document everything, Ms. Goyer said: "I guarantee you'll have to go back and check what happened three days ago."

Toiletries to stay clean and healthy

Basic essentials like deodorant, a toothbrush and toothpaste, contact solution, dry shampoo, and face and body wipes are must-haves for a hospital go bag, especially since it might be tough to shower regularly. Ms. Goyer also recommends bringing your own hand sanitizer, antibacterial hand wipes, toilet paper, and facial tissues, since they'll probably be nicer than what the hospital provides.

Disinfectant wipes are great for wiping down frequently used (and infrequently cleaned) surfaces like TV remotes, to prevent the spread of infections. Additionally, Ms. Goyer said, you should make sure to wash your hands with soap and water as much as you can.

"Hand sanitizer doesn't protect against some germs found in hospitals," like C. diff or MRSA, she said. "My mom got an infection in the hospital that really complicated the end of her life."

Hospital air is also notoriously dry, so you should pack moisturizer, lip balm, and saline nasal spray, and drink plenty of water. When Ms. Goyer's mother got a sinus infection in the hospital, she got her doctor's permission to bring in a steam vaporizer to provide some relief.

Some hospitals won't allow you to take medication you bring from home — even over-the-counter meds — as a safety precaution. But just in case, it's a good idea to bring along a few extra doses of any medications you're taking, as well as medical devices like inhalers or hearing aids.

Ms. Ojala said the contents of a hospital go bag will vary depending on the needs of the patient and caregiver.

“What I’d love for people to do before packing a bag is think about what helps them heal,” she said. “Clinicians are great at their jobs, but they don’t often ask: ‘What do you think is going to help you?’ ”

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