

HEALTH LITERACY FACT SHEETS

Improving Verbal Communication to Promote Patient Health Literacy

Delivering verbal health information in a clear, friendly, and culturally relevant manner can promote understanding and self-empowerment — no matter the literacy level of the patient.

Verbal communication, particularly between providers and patients in a health care setting, is a critical way to share vital information, make joint decisions, and express empathy and understanding. Following are approaches to improve verbal communication and create a comfortable, equitable environment for patients. These strategies can help health care providers — as well as other professionals interacting verbally with patients, such as care managers or health plan administrators — promote patient understanding, health literacy, behavior change, and comfort. When starting out, some providers find it helpful to try just one technique at a time. As their comfort and success grow, they can add more strategies.



Guiding Verbal Communications Principles

- **Create a safe and respectful environment.** Greet your patients warmly. Make eye contact. Sit down. Take time to get to know your patient and earn their trust.
- **Use speech that is easy to understand.** Speak slower than usual. Remember that even though information might be obvious to you, it is likely new to your patients. Limit content to a few key, specific points. Avoid generalization and vagueness. For example, instead of telling a patient to get “adequate” sleep, say “get seven to eight hours of sleep each night.” Use words that are simple and familiar. Stay away from acronyms and complex technical jargon (see *Simplified Language* examples on the next page).
- **Engage your patients.** Use pictures, physical models, or videos to illustrate technically complex topics. Ask open-ended questions to facilitate conversation. Get to know what your

HEALTH LITERACY FACT SHEET SERIES

This fact sheet is part of a series addressing the impact of limited health literacy and providing strategies for organizational improvement. For more information, visit www.chcs.org/health-literacy.

patients care about most — including family, friends, work, and hobbies — and incorporate those into your conversations.

- **Confirm understanding.** Ask your patients to tell you what they understood about what you shared (see “teach back method” described below). Take responsibility for clear communication by ensuring that they can accurately summarize key points.

Examples of Simplified Language Swap-Outs	
<i>Frequently Used Term</i>	<i>Suggested Modification</i>
Chronic disease or condition	A health problem that will not improve, that goes away and comes back, and/or that lasts forever. Examples are diabetes, asthma, and high blood pressure.
Hormone	Natural or manmade chemical that can impact your energy, mood, and/or growth
Hypertension	High blood pressure
Myocardial infarction	Heart attack
Deductible	The amount you must pay for health services before your insurance starts to pay.

(Source: Modified from [CDC’s Plain Language Thesaurus for Health Communications](#))

Help Patients Prepare for Health Care Appointments

To improve the quality and content of in-person and virtual patient appointments, providers, care managers, health plan administrators, and other patient-facing professionals can recommend that their patients:

- Make a list of two or three questions they want answered.
- Bring photos or the actual bottles of all prescriptions, over the counter products, vitamins, and herbal medicines or supplements they are taking or have recently taken.
- Bring copies of recent test results or reports from other health care providers, including any personal health records, including digital records.
- Ask a family member or friend to come with them to take notes, ask questions, and help remember what was discussed.
- Report all symptoms and anything that does not seem quite right and ask their provider to repeat instructions at the end of the visit.

[Questions are the Answer](#) is a resource from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) that helps patients think about what questions to ask their health care providers. Examples include:

1. **What is this test (or procedure) for?**
2. **When will I get the results?**
3. **How do you spell the name of that drug?**
4. **Are there any side effects?**
5. **Are there any other options?**

The resource also offers an app that helps patients and caregivers organize their questions so that they can maximize their appointment time.

Clear Communication Strategies for Health Care Providers

There are many tools and techniques that health care providers and other patient-facing professionals can use to better communicate. AHRQ's [Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit](#) recommends the following strategies.¹

- **Teach-Back Method:** This helps health care providers confirm their patients' understanding of the information conveyed to them during their appointments. First, the provider takes responsibility for clear communication by saying something such as, "I want to make sure I explained things clearly." Then, they ask the patient a *specific* question about what they need to do or what they heard the doctor tell them. This is the "teach back" part of the process. For example, "I want to make sure I explained everything clearly enough. Please tell me in your own words how you're going to take your new medicine."
- **Patient Follow Up:** This is the act of following up with patients or their caregivers to answer questions and check in. Providers, such as doctors and nurses, or other patient-facing staff can do the follow up, depending on its content. It is important to first find out patients' preferred communication methods (e.g., patient portal, email, text messages, phone call) and document those preferences in their medical record.
- **Motivational Interviewing:** This patient-centered communication method is based on addressing goals that the patient has defined and doing so in a comfortable, familiar environment. Throughout the interview, patients will gradually feel "motivated" to work toward more ambitious goals. Health care providers are increasingly using motivational interviewing to support their patients with complex chronic conditions and significant social barriers. The technique can also help patients with limited health literacy skills who may need assistance mapping out a step-by-step process to reach their health care goals.
- **Language Access:** Ensure that staff know how to obtain qualified medical interpreters both when needed and in advance of appointments.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR HEALTH CARE STRATEGIES

The Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS) is a policy design and implementation partner devoted to improving outcomes for people enrolled in Medicaid. CHCS supports partners across sectors and disciplines to make more effective, efficient, and equitable care possible for millions of people across the nation. For more information, visit www.chcs.org.

ENDNOTES

¹ Agency on Healthcare Research and Quality. *AHRQ health literacy universal precautions toolkit* (2nd edition). (2020, September). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/improve/precautions/toolkit.html>