

Tips for Communicating Clearly

Overview

Patients often need to remember several things when they leave a primary care practice. Communicating effectively with patients is important to ensure:

- Patient safety.
- Patient self-management.
- Efficient use of time.

All levels of communication are important, whether it be for diagnostic purposes, taking medication correctly, preparing for lab work, home care, followup, or scheduling appointments. Clear oral communication strategies help patients feel more involved in their health care and increase their likelihood of accepting recommendations.

Purpose

To introduce effective oral communication strategies and offer suggestions on how to increase staff awareness as they interact with patients. This tool is for the entire health care team.

Testimonial

“Our practice implemented this tool by giving the Communication Self Assessment worksheet to 11 physicians and asking them to complete it and rate their communication skills. It was interesting to note that 80 percent recorded that they had good communication skills with their patients, yet over one-third of them reported that they did not verify that patients understood the directions before leaving the office (e.g., teach-back). We then asked them to fill out the assessment after each of the next few patient visits. The results improved, but what was even more important was that several commented that they liked the tool because it reminded them about skills to use for good communication and consequently they were more aware of them when they went in to see their next patient.”

-MD, family practice teaching facility



Action

- **Key communication strategies.**
 - ◇ **Warm greeting:** Greet patients with a smile and a welcoming attitude.
 - ◇ **Eye contact:** Make appropriate eye contact throughout the interaction.
 - ◇ **Plain, non-medical language:** Use common words when speaking to patients. Take note of what words they use to describe their illness and use them in your conversation.
 - ◇ **Slow down:** Speak clearly and at a moderate pace.
 - ◇ **Limit content:** Prioritize what needs to be discussed and limit information to 3-5 key points.
 - ◇ **Repeat key points:** Be specific and concrete in your conversation and repeat key points.
 - ◇ **Graphics:** Draw pictures, use illustrations, or demonstrate with 3-D models.
 - ◇ **Patient participation:** Encourage patients to ask questions and be involved in the conversation during visits and to be proactive in their health care.
 - ◆ Refer to [Tool 14: Encourage Questions](#) ↩ for guidance on how to encourage your patients to ask questions.
 - ◇ **Teach-back:** Confirm patients understand what they need to know and do by asking them to teach back directions.
 - ◆ Refer to [Tool 5: The Teach-Back Method](#) ↩ for more guidance on how to use the teach-back method.

Tips ★

Strategies to Remind Staff About Communication Skills



- [Key communication strategies poster](#). 📄
 - ◇ Hang poster in various locations.
- **Staff bulletin board messages.**
 - ◇ Include key points and update regularly.

- **Clear communication strategies in practice.**
 - ◊ **Assessments**
 - ◆ **Staff self-assessment:** Have all staff complete the brief [Communication Self-Assessment](#)  after one patient encounter a day during the week and reflect on their interaction. This will help them see if they are using the strategies and where they might need to improve.
 - ◆ **Patient assessment:** Devise a short patient survey using some suggestions from [Tool 17: Get Patient Feedback](#)  or from the communication self-assessment form to ask patients how staff are communicating.

Track Your Progress

- **Assess personal improvement.**
 - ◊ Examine your staff's completed Communication Self-Assessment sheets after a week. After a few weeks have passed, complete another round of self-assessments and look for changes. If your staff are actively adopting these strategies, you should see improvements.
- **Obtain patient feedback.**
 - ◊ Collect patient feedback before implementing the tool. Then administer the questions again 2 or 3 months later to assess for improvement.

Resources

- Manual: [“Health Literacy and Patient Safety: Help Patients Understand”](#)  by the American Medical Association offers suggestions for improving oral communication and alternatives to complex medical words (pages 31-34).
- [“Plain Language Thesaurus for Health Communications”](#)  by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can give you tips on avoiding medical jargon when you communicate with patients.