

Strategies to Support Patient Comprehension

A significant challenge in healthcare communication is ensuring that patients understand both verbal and written health information, including clinical explanations, recommendations, instructions, educational materials, and more.

Health information and services often are unfamiliar and confusing, and people of all ages, races, cultures, incomes, and educational levels struggle with health literacy and numeracy. Taking steps to support patient comprehension is a critical element of patient engagement and patient-centered care. The following checklist can help healthcare providers evaluate their current approaches for promoting patient comprehension and identify potential gaps and opportunities for improvement.

| | Yes | No |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Do you provide verbal health information and instructions in lay language and use words that are well known to individuals without medical training (e.g., “shortness of breath” instead of “dyspnea,” and “dry mouth” instead of “xerostomia”)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If no common term exists for a medical or technical term, do you explain the term the first time you use it? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you avoid or explain words that might have a different meaning in common usage than in the medical context (e.g., “negative,” “unremarkable,” “progressing,” and “impressive”). | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Are patient forms and educational materials easy-to-read, and do they adhere to the principles of plain language ? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Is written information organized in a logical and clear manner, with the most important information presented first? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do verbal discussions and written materials focus on what the patient needs to know and what they might want to know? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

| | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Does verbal discussions and written materials exclude extraneous details that could distract the patient and potentially inhibit understanding? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Are well-designed visual aids (e.g., photos, illustrations, videos, etc.) used to help reinforce important messages and concepts? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| When possible, and with the patient's permission, do you include the patient's family members or significant others in discussions about the patient's care? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| As part of communication strategies, do you consider factors that might affect comprehension, such as language barriers, cultural beliefs and values, and any impairments or disabilities that might affect the patient's capacity to understand? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you have access to language services, interpreters, and assistive technologies to meet patients' diverse needs, and are patients made aware of these resources? (Note: Although including families and significant others in patient care is a strategy for improving comprehension, avoid using these individuals as interpreters. Learn more about acceptable language assistance services .) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| During patient encounters, do you ask open-ended questions rather than closed-ended questions to facilitate more meaningful communication? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you use techniques and methods that can aid in cross-cultural communication and help determine whether patients fully understand health information (e.g., motivational interviewing , the LEARN model , the explanatory model , the RESPECT model , and the teach-back technique)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Does your organization's philosophy on informed consent reinforce the belief that patients must fully understand the information provided during the consent process to make informed decisions? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Is the informed consent process tailored to each patient, and does it include a clear explanation of risks, benefits, and alternative options? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you encourage patients to ask questions, and is ample time allotted for questions and review of materials during patient appointments and informed consent discussions? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you provide follow-up instructions verbally and in writing to reinforce the information? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

| | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Do you provide patients with updated written instructions if changes in their care plans occur? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| When patients do not adhere to treatment plans, do you consider and assess whether they might not understand information or have health literacy barriers? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do providers and staff members at your organization receive training on health literacy barriers and techniques to improve communication and patient comprehension? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Resource

For more information on this topic, see MedPro’s [Risk Resources: Health Literacy and Cultural Competence](#).

This document does not constitute legal or medical advice and should not be construed as rules or establishing a standard of care. Because the facts applicable to your situation may vary, or the laws applicable in your jurisdiction may differ, please contact your attorney or other professional advisors if you have any questions related to your legal or medical obligations or rights, state or federal laws, contract interpretation, or other legal questions.

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