



What are communication barriers?

Communication barriers are different factors that can affect how patients and caregivers understand and/or express their health information or health concerns. These barriers can lead to a lack of understanding by patients about their condition, medications, post-surgical care, or other instructions. This can lead to poor health outcomes or safety incidents. This tip sheet is focused on working with patients with limited English proficiency.

Some language barriers are obvious, while some may not be noticeable at all. Some may present only in certain situations. You may have a patient who can chat with you in English about the weather, but who may not understand when you describe the procedure they have coming up or how to read a nutrition label. Or, you may have a patient who is confident reading English but who may not feel confident speaking English to ask important questions.

For tips on communicating with patients who have cognitive or physical barriers to communication, click [here](#).

Potential barriers and how to help

Lack of knowledge of the healthcare system or medical conditions



The healthcare system can be very confusing and overwhelming. It takes many different skills to get, understand, communicate and use information to make informed decisions about health and to navigate the health care system. Many Canadians, especially seniors, struggle to use health information or navigate healthcare services. This is especially present when they are feeling anxious, in pain, tired or recovering from an illness.

How to Help?

Consider health literacy. Click here for more tips on health literacy >> [link to health lit tips](#)



Language barriers



Many of our patients have difficulty communicating in English, especially when dealing with complicated topics or understanding medical instructions. They may or may not be able to read the materials you provide to them to take home.

How to Help?

Always ask all patients their language preference. Even if someone is able to converse in English, they may be more comfortable discussing complex or sensitive subjects in another language.

Arrange for an interpreter. Always use a professional interpreter instead of a family member, even though family should still be welcomed for support. **Provide translated materials.** Even having the heading translated is extremely helpful.

Limit text and instead use pictures, graphics, and icons. Visuals can help to communicate unclear information, if they are meaningful.

Provide a paper and pen if your patient doesn't have their own writing materials in case they would like to take notes in English or in their preferred language. Offer to write out or highlight important words, such as their diagnosis or medication instructions, so that they can see them.

Slow down. Speak slowly and clearly, and check in to ensure understanding after presenting new concepts or information. Pause periodically to give them opportunities to think about what you just said and to form their response.

Hands-on-practice to foster and help demonstrate their learnings can be helpful.

Check for understanding using teach-back. Simply asking "did you understand?" may simply result in a "yes," as some patients may feel embarrassed to say that they didn't understand. Have the patients teach back to you what they have learned so you can identify gaps in understanding.

