



What are physical and cognitive needs?

Physical and cognitive needs are factors that can affect how patients and caregivers understand and express their health information or health concerns. Without being addressed, these can be barriers that can lead to a lack of understanding by patients about their condition, medications, post-surgical care, or other instructions. This can result in poor health outcomes or safety incidents.

Some physical or cognitive needs are obvious, while some may not be noticeable at all. Some may present only in certain situations. You may have a patient who seems to understand by nodding when you speak, but needs a hearing aid to hear the details of your instructions. Or a patient may be overwhelmed by the information and need additional processing time, but still state that they understand the information.

Potential needs and how to help

Physical or Cognitive Impairments



People with physical or cognitive impairments may need extra support to ensure effective communication is happening. A patient with a hearing impairment, for example, may need a hearing aid to participate in a discussion. Someone with a visual impairment may need discharge information in a specific format and may learn more by doing instead of by talking.

A patient with a communication disorder, such as aphasia, may need the information presented in a different way to support their understanding or to help them express themselves, even though their intelligence may not be affected. To help them understand, it may help to use simplified language, speak in shorter sentences, use pictures or real objects when possible, draw, and write down key words. To help them speak or express themselves, it may help to ask yes/no questions or provide written multiple choice options for them to point to, and encourage use of gestures. In all cases, it is important to be patient and allow for these conversations to take extra time if needed.

It may not always be obvious when someone has a cognitive or physical impairment, and if they are truly grasping the information. It is always good to ask the patient and family caregiver if they have any specific communication strategies, and to use teach-back to ensure understanding.



Physical or Cognitive Impairments

How to Help?

Notice and check-in on your patient's needs. Before beginning your discharge teaching, ask if there is anything they need to support their learning. They may need to put on their glasses, put in their hearing aid, call a family member to conference in by phone, use the washroom, or grab their phone, notebook or tablet to make notes or recordings.

Include friends and family. If you know your patient has cognitive impairments that might limit their ability to manage their care, ensure friends or family members are present to help learn care instructions. Be sure to ask the patient their preference on who should be included in what conversations.

Ask about care at home. Ask how your patient plans to manage their care at home to learn about their past strategies and potential barriers. Help identify strategies and resources such as medication timers and apps that can help.

Give your patient time to think. Pause between sentences to ensure there is sufficient time for them to think and process the information. Provide opportunities to ask questions.

Work with your interprofessional team. Depending on your patient's needs, involving the interprofessional team members can be helpful. For example, an Occupational Therapist can identify strategies to help patients more readily self-manage certain tasks. A Speech Language Pathologist can provide tips and resources to facilitate conversations with someone with communication impairment, such as aphasia.

Make use of available accessibility tools. You can access the Deaf, Deafened, Hearing Loss and Hard of Hearing Toolkit from UHN and the Canadian Hearing Society and the Clear Print Accessibility Guidelines from the CNIB below.



Information of aphasia/supportive communication:

Aphasia Institute

Heart and Stroke Foundation: Communication

UHN Patient Education brochures:

What is Aphasia
Tips for Talking



Stress, fatigue, pain or medications



People often face these barriers as they prepare to leave the hospital. They may feel overwhelmed with information and have trouble acting on instructions because they feel unwell, tired, medicated, worried or in pain.

How to Help?

Repeat and reinforce important information with patients and their caregivers.

Provide written information that patients can refer back to in order to review key instructions, including the PODS handout and any other key resources.

Use teach back as a way to assess understanding. Ask a patient or family member to repeat back to you, in their own words, the instructions you have given, to be sure your communication was effective. If you notice key information is missing or incorrect in the patient or family members' teach back, explain again and re-check.

Click here for more information about teach back, including demonstration videos and an e-learning module.

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

