

Understanding Medical Language: Simple is Better

Improving Your Health Is As Easy As “Ask Me 3”

(NPSF)—Imagine you are at the doctor’s office. After your exam, your doctor says you have “diabetic neuropathy,” “hypertension” or “coronary disease.” How do you react? Do you know what this means?

What if, instead, your doctor says you have “nerve problems,” “high blood pressure,” or “heart disease?” You may recognize these terms, but do you know how they will affect your health? Do you know how to treat them? Do you understand what changes you have to make in your life?

If your health care visits leave you with more questions than answers, you are not alone. Most people want health information that is written in plain language, and easy to understand and use. Medical words are hard for many people to understand—no matter how much education they have. Tell your doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other members of your health care team when you do not understand the information they give you. It will help you learn how to better take care of yourself and your family.

You may not be able to change the way your health care providers talk. But you can take steps to help you get the answers you need:

1. Don’t be shy—ask questions.

Make a list of questions to bring with you to your doctor so you do not forget to ask them. The Partnership for Clear Health Communication at the National Patient Safety Foundation (NPSF) suggests using its “Ask Me 3” program. “Ask Me 3” suggests three simple but important questions people can ask their health care providers:

- **What is my main problem?**
- **What do I need to do?**
- **Why is it important for me to do this?**

If you can focus on getting answers to these three questions, you will have information necessary to help you actively participate in your health care. If you think of more questions after your visit, write them down and contact your doctor or health care professional to discuss them.

2. Bring a family member or friend. This person may be able to help you take notes and hear the provider’s instructions—in case you miss something.



3. Speak up. Tell your health care provider if you do not understand the information being given to you. Ask to have instructions repeated until you know what you need to do. Your health care team is there to help you and expect you to ask questions if you do not understand.

4. Repeat instructions. After your doctor or health care provider gives you instructions, repeat them back. This will help them understand what you have heard and allow them to clarify anything that needs further explanation. Make sure you’ve got the information right.

5. Ask for more information. If your provider says you have a health problem, ask where you can go for additional information after your visit—such as a web site, a hotline number or written materials. The more you know, the more you can help yourself.

For more on how to communicate better with your health care team, go to the National Patient Safety Foundation’s Partnership for Clear Health Communication Web site at www.npsf.org/askMe3. It has information on the “Ask Me 3” program and how it can help you.