



HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH CANCER PATIENTS

Tips for Health Care Workers



WHY COMMUNICATE WITH PATIENTS

Good communication with patients and caregivers is very important in cancer care, and can help patients:

- Understand their diagnosis;
- Deal with fear and anxiety;
- Be more satisfied with care and feel more in control;
- Understand and follow through with treatment;
- Adopt a healthy lifestyle;
- Have a better quality of life;
- Be informed.

Poor communication can lead to failure to follow treatment, negative patient outcomes, an increase in a patient's anxiety, and feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness¹.

WHEN TO COMMUNICATE WITH CANCER PATIENTS

Communication is important throughout cancer care, but especially when important decisions are to be made. These important decision times include:

- When the patient is first diagnosed. Make sure you explain cancer basics, as well as the specific diagnosis and treatment plan, including side effects.
- Any time new decisions about treatment need to be made.
- After treatment, when discussing how well it worked.
- Whenever the goal of care changes.
- When the patient makes his or her wishes known about advance directives, such as a living will.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH PATIENTS

When speaking with patients, keep these simple approaches in mind^{2,3}.

- **Avoid using medical jargon.** The patient is unlikely to understand it. Use simple, everyday language. Keep to short statements and clear, simple explanations.
- **Check for understanding.** Miscommunication is common so make sure the patient and caregiver have understood what you are saying.
- **Include a patient's caregiver.** If two people receive the same information, there's a better chance that they will retain it. Be sure to address questions from the caregiver with as much attention as if they came directly from the patient. Be sure you seek the permission before sharing any information with anyone else.
- **Tell the truth.** Be truthful and don't minimize the impact of what you're saying.
- **Don't rush through negative information.** When speaking about possible side effects or complications, be kind but candid. It is important that the patient knows what could happen and is prepared to deal with it.
- **Ask the patient if they have any questions.** This will allow you to check their understanding.

TIPS

- Listen with more than your ears. Look at the patient's facial expressions and body language.
- Make sure you're at the same level as the patient – don't stand up if they are sitting.
- Maintain eye contact.

BREAKING BAD NEWS

As a general rule, make sure you are using language and images or illustrations that people can understand and relate to.

The following steps to breaking bad news about an illness are helpful:

- Prepare well. Know all the facts before meeting the patient/caregiver.
- Find a quiet, private space where you can speak with the patient.
- Find out how much the patient already knows.
- Check that the patient/caregiver wants more information and how much more.
- Indicate that the information to be given is serious.
- Encourage expression of feelings.
- Give more information if requested, systematically and in simple language.
- Listen to concerns and ask questions.
- Wind down the session by summarising issues that are raised and plan the next steps.
- Make yourself available to discuss the illness further, as needed.



1. Supplemental health care, Communicating Effectively with Patients, 2016. Available at: <http://blog.supplementalhealthcare.com/patient-care-forum/communicating-effectively-patients>
2. Travalaine, John, et al. Patient-Physician Communication: Why and How. The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association, January 2005, Vol. 105, 13-18.
3. African Palliative Care Association. A Handbook of Palliative Care in Africa, 2010.

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