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## Bridging the Communication Gap Between Doctor and Patient

Does your patient nod quietly while giving you a blank look? That may be the first hint that the patient does not understand the explanation or instructions given to them by the physician or staff. Many patients have trouble understanding health information. They may not really understand the meaning of the words that clinicians regularly use in discussions with patients - words like bowel, colon, hypertension, screening test, or cardiac disease.

The use of "doctor speak" may easily confuse patients and may lead to medical errors and poor health outcomes. Because of language and education barriers, sometimes patients are not comfortable asking questions.

Following are several ideas to help decrease the communication gap between you and your patients:

1. Take a look at Ask Me 3™, a tool created by the National Patient Safety Foundation. Ask Me 3™ specifies three essential questions that patients should be able to answer after every health care encounter.
  - a. What is my main problem?
  - b. What do I need to do?
  - c. Why is it important for me to do this?For more information and to download materials go to:  
[www.npsf.org/askme3/](http://www.npsf.org/askme3/)
2. Follow this with a teach-back. The physician or staff member asks the patient to repeat the directions back to demonstrate understanding. After clinicians have structured the information given to patients around Ask Me 3™, the teach-back method is one of the most effective ways to check for patient understanding.
3. Don't ask the patient if they understand. Patients may answer with a "yes," even though they do not understand.
4. Use simple words and short sentences. Medical jargon should be avoided and simple pictures should be used when helpful. Emphasis should be on what the patient should do; unnecessary information should be avoided.

Communication barriers often go undetected in health care settings and can have serious effects on the health and safety of patients. Good communication means healthy patients!

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