

Helping with Communication with the Doctor

Support Person Fact Sheet

Key Facts

If the person you are supporting has a disability that affects their speech or hearing, it may be difficult for them to verbally communicate with their medical provider or understand information that is given. This may also cause a barrier for their medical provider to be able to understand the person and their needs. It may be necessary for you, as a service provider, parent, or family member, to support the person by informing the medical provider about any communication difficulties. Doing so may reduce communication barriers and help the medical provider and their patient successfully communicate.



Preparing for an Appointment

You can help the person prepare for their appointment and get ready to talk with the doctor. Explain to the person what may happen during the visit. Help the person to think about what they want to tell the doctor and what questions they want to ask. It is a good idea to have the person write the questions down in advance. It may also help to role-play with them to give them a chance to practice.



Helping the Person Communicate with their Doctor

Some people do not use many words, but they have other ways to express themselves. Some people use sign language or pictures. Others may use hand gestures and facial expressions. As a support person you may understand what the person is trying to say. However, it is important to allow the person to communicate with their health care provider and make decisions on their own whenever possible. You can assist with communication or decisions as needed, while keeping the person's best interests in mind.

When necessary, consider these possible steps:

- Encourage the person to see a doctor they are comfortable with and try to see the same doctor every time.
- Explain to the doctor how the person communicates.
- If the person needs assistance with an introduction, introduce the person to the doctor first before introducing yourself.
- Encourage the doctor to speak directly to the person. If the doctor starts by asking you questions, repeat them to the person for them to answer. Or ask the person if it is OK for you to talk about their health problem with the medical provider.

Making and Using a Personal Profile

- Ask the doctor to speak slowly and clearly, and to explain difficult ideas in simple words. You may need to repeat what the doctor said using language that is easier to understand.
- Check that the person understands what is being communicated. For example, get them to tell you what the doctor said.
- See if the person has questions.
- Ask the doctor to show the person diagrams, testing equipment, etc.
- Physician's assistants, nurses, and other allied health professionals may also be good resources for communication.



What should a Personal Profile Include?

- What the person is like when well - include things they are good at and favorite activities. Is the person usually happy and active? Include a recent photo.
- How the person communicates - for people who do not use many words, describe other ways they communicate, such as signs used, how they show pain and contentment, how they express yes and no.
- Suggestions for conversation starters may include their favorite football team or TV show.
- Strategies to help the person stay calm and cooperate with medical procedures.
- Any relevant religious or cultural practices, dietary restrictions or fasting periods, and alternative therapies or herbal supplements.
- The profile should be about one page and can be helpful when visiting a variety of health professionals. It may also be helpful for other occasions.

For more information:

[Click here to learn how to prepare for a doctor appointment \(URL: https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/how-prepare-doctors-appointment\)](https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/how-prepare-doctors-appointment)

[Click here to view an example personal profile \(URL: https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/personal-health-record/art-20047273\)](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/personal-health-record/art-20047273)

Related fact sheets:

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This fact sheet was created in June 2021.

The fact sheet contains general information only and does not take into account individual circumstances. It should not be relied on for medical advice. We encourage you to review the information in this fact sheet within the context of educational purposes and when appropriate, share it with your health professional to decide whether the information is right for you.

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