

Teach-back Technique

The “teach-back” technique is an effective method for ensuring that patients understand what you have told them. It involves asking patients to explain or demonstrate what they have been told. For example, you can say, “I want you to explain to me how you will take your medication, so I can be sure I have explained everything correctly,” or “Please show me how you will use the asthma inhaler, so I can be sure I have given you clear instructions,” or “When you get home your spouse will ask you what the doctor said—what will you tell your spouse?”

The teach-back technique

- Do not ask a patient, “Do you understand?”
- Instead, ask patients to explain or demonstrate how they will undertake a recommended treatment or intervention.
- If the patient does not explain correctly, assume that you have not provided adequate teaching. Re-teach the information using alternate approaches.

In using the teach-back technique, clinicians take responsibility for adequate teaching. If patients cannot explain or demonstrate what they should do, clinicians must assume that they did not provide patients with an adequate explanation or understandable instructions. The result should be new efforts to ensure that patients learn what they need to know. And, of course, it is important not to appear rushed, annoyed, or bored during these efforts—your affect must agree with your words.

Research indicates that the teach-back technique is effective, not just for improving patients’ understanding, but also for improving outcomes. For example, patients with diabetes whose physicians assess patient’s comprehension and recall with the teach-back technique have significantly better diabetes control than patients whose physicians do not use the technique.

The teach-back technique should replace the more common practice of simply asking a patient, “Do you understand what I have told you?” Experience shows that patients often answer “yes” to such questions, even when they understand nothing.

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