

# American Family Physician Patient Handout Instructions

## DID YOU KNOW...

- The average American adult reads at an eighth-grade level. Most patient education materials exceed that level.
- More than one-third of American adults have limited literacy skills (i.e., reads below a fifth-grade level). However, limited literacy exceeds 50% in many segments of the population, including disadvantaged populations and older adults.
- Physicians, including family physicians, are often incorrect in their assessment of whether patients understand patient education materials.
- Patients, especially those with limited literacy, often don't understand common medical terms, such as rectum, stool, or screening.
- Patients with limited literacy are distracted by, and spend more time looking at, irrelevant or unnecessary information before they find pertinent information in written materials.
- Even highly literate patients prefer simple, easy-to-read handouts.
- Most patients only retain two to four key points from a handout.

## WHEN CREATING A PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT...

- Try to write at no higher than a sixth-grade level. You can check readability statistics by using the Proofing options available within the MS Word Spelling and Grammar tool.
- You can lower the reading level by avoiding words of more than two syllables, shortening sentences and paragraphs (two to three sentences), and using bulleted lists rather than long paragraphs.
- The content should focus on what patients *need* to know, rather than on what it would be nice for them to know. Less information is usually better than more.
- Information should focus on what patients need to *do* to manage or treat their medical condition, rather than on etiology, anatomy, pathophysiology, etc.

**Having trouble focusing the handout on a limited amount of information?** For many medical conditions, especially chronic illnesses, it is impossible for a one- or two-page handout to cover all the information a patient might need to know over the course of the illness. It may be helpful to focus on key points of information for a patient who is newly diagnosed with the condition.

## Suggested Formats

Use a *Question-and-Answer* format, or an *Instruction Sheet* format, that tells the patient what to do about a particular condition. Look at the samples below, or review other handouts from previous issues of *American Family Physician (AFP)* on our Web site: <http://www.aafp.org/afp>. Remember, you don't need to cover everything—emphasize what's important.

### QUESTION-AND-ANSWER FORMATS

#### Ask-Me-3 Format

This approach is recommended by the National Patient Safety Foundation. It involves providing the answers to three basic questions:

**What's the problem?** Name the patient's condition and briefly explain what it is. For example, "Strep throat is a kind of sore throat caused by a germ called strep."

**What needs to be done about the problem?** Explain what the patient needs to do. For example, "You will need to take medicine twice a day. Take it every morning and night for a full 10 days. Even if you feel better, take medicine for all 10 days."

**Why does that need to be done?** Explain why the patient needs to do that. For example, "Strep throat can cause heart problems if it's not treated. Medicine can help prevent these heart problems."

#### Generic Questions and Answers

Identify two to four important points you want a patient to know about their medical condition and what they need to do about it. Create a handout in question-and-answer format in which you pose and answer questions about those points. Sample questions are listed below.

Title: What can I do about X? or, What you should know about X.

*Sample Questions:*

- What is the disease/symptom/problem/test/procedure (definition)?
- Who gets it and why (what are the risk factors)? Tell what causes X. Is it contagious? Is it common or rare? At what ages do people get it? Does it run in families?
- How can I/my doctor tell if I have X (diagnosis)? List the signs/symptoms. Are there any tests my doctor will do (keep it general)? Are there any other problems that resemble X (differential diagnosis)?
- How is X treated (treatment)? List the treatment options (keep it general). What are the

risks/side effects of treatment?

- What can I expect (prognosis)? Do most people get better/worse/stay the same? Are there any things I can't do? Can I drive, travel, work, eat a regular diet, drink alcohol, have sex, or be near others? What if I am pregnant?
- How can I prevent X (prevention)?
- If appropriate, provide simple sketches or copies of illustrations. For example, anatomic drawings may be particularly useful. Please note that *AFP* will create original illustrations based on your guidance; do not commission an artist on your own.
- Where can I get more information (additional resources)? List national organizations, self-help groups, toll-free numbers, or Web sites. Include only credible, *non-commercial* resources.

#### **INSTRUCTION SHEET FORMAT (e.g., exercises, diets, medication directions, wellness tips, etc.):**

Title: What to do for X. Subtitle: such as Diet, Exercise, Wellness Tips, Taking your Medicine

- Outline the basic steps in the program of exercise, diet, or other therapy. List what to avoid, if applicable.
- Provide simple sketches or copies of illustration ideas. Please note that *AFP* will create original illustrations based on your guidance; do not commission an artist on your own.

#### **Resources with more information on writing patient education handouts:**

"Ask Me 3" program

National Patient Safety Foundation

<http://www.npsf.org/for-healthcare-professionals/programs/ask-me-3/>

*Health Literacy Universal Precautions Toolkit*

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

Tool 11 (4 pp.): Design Easy-to-Read Material:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2833333/pdf/nihms-283333.pdf>

Entire Toolkit (227 pp.):

<http://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/quality-patient-safety/quality-resources/tools/literacy-toolkit/index.html>

*Health Literacy and Patient Safety: Help Patients Understand*, 2nd edition (62 pp.)

American Medical Association Foundation and American Medical Association

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/367/healthlitclinicians.pdf>

## Writing Guidelines for AFP Patient Education Handouts

When writing a patient education handout, keep the patient in mind. Use simple words, avoid jargon, talk directly to the patient, and explain things as you might to your grandmother or a friend.

**Keep it short.** Aim for about 400 words for a one-page handout, or about 750 words for a two-page handout.

**Keep it simple.** Use short sentences (fewer than 12 words) and short paragraphs (two to three sentences). Use common, one- or two-syllable words. Use transition words, such as next, then, first, and finally. Limit the use of medical terms. If you do use a medical term (because it's something a patient might hear in relation to their condition), be sure to explain what it means.

**Make it personal.** Address the handout directly to the patient. Use "you" frequently. Imagine how you would address a patient sitting in your office.

**Be specific.** Write "Drink 8 ounces of water at least four times a day," rather than "Drink plenty of fluids." Or, "Do not lift anything heavier than 5 pounds," rather than "Avoid heavy lifting." Avoid generalities such as: "Cut down on fatty foods," or "Exercise more."

**Keep it active.** Avoid using the passive voice.

**Keep it focused.** Include the key points. Avoid extraneous detail. Keep it practical, not theoretical. Should it discuss diagnosis, treatment, or both?

**Make it balanced.** If the topic is controversial, present multiple viewpoints or a range of treatment options. Don't bias the presentation, or limit the patient or physician using the handout to only one side of the topic.

**Make it informative.** Tell the patient the key things that most people would like to know about the condition.

**Organize it.** Use headings to organize and highlight the information.

**Make it user-friendly.** Use an appropriate format—question and answer, set of instructions, or standard discussion about the condition and its diagnosis and treatment (see Suggested Formats).

**Make it a resource.** Include the names and addresses (toll-free numbers and Web sites) of national groups that offer support and educational material, such as the American Heart Association or the American Diabetes Association. Include only credible, *non-commercial* resources.

**Illustrate it.** Include copies of simple drawings if that would help make a point, such as specific exercises for knee rehabilitation. Please note that *AFP* will create original illustrations based on your guidance; do not commission an artist on your own.

***PLEASE NOTE: Your draft will be edited to meet AFP style requirements and to ensure the reading level is appropriate for the general public.***