

Patient Education Literature

OVERVIEW

Patient information documents, which often take the form of leaflets or pamphlets, assist patients as they make medical decisions related to treatment options, medications, and surgeries, among other medical procedures. While these documents need to be factually correct and specific, they must also be written in a style that is accessible by patients who do not have medical training. They should be organized with headings that make the document easy to read and that put the patient at ease with material that might be overwhelming for them. Keep in mind, too, that these brief documents are meant to supplement, not replace, communication that has already taken place between the patient and his or her doctors.

ORGANIZATION

Using a question-answer approach to content delivery will provide readers a familiar organizational structure while also reinforcing the conversational tone of the document. Here are some typical questions that you might use as headings in your document:

- What is this test/procedure?
- Why do I need this test/procedure?
- How should I prepare for it?
- What will happen during the test/procedure?
- What potential after effects or complications might I experience?
- When will I receive the results?
- Who can I contact with questions?

CONTENT

Each heading should be immediately followed by short, easy-to-read paragraphs that respond to the question posed in the heading. The responses should be written in active voice and in the second-person point-of-view to assist with ease of reading and to foster a sense of personal power and agency in the patient. Along the same lines, these responses should avoid medical jargon, confusing abbreviations, or other terminology that would be confusing to patients without medical training.

On Audience

Before you begin writing patient education literature, it's important that you fully understand the needs of your target audience. Generally speaking, most patients are not medical professionals, so they are often uncomfortable with medical terminology. Often, too, because they are experiencing a medical condition of some kind, they may feel vulnerable or overwhelmed. Since the goal of these documents is to guide patients toward making an important medical decision, you should choose a style that will help put the reader at ease with the content and that will empower them to understand the material so they can make an informed decision about the test or procedure.

In some cases, you may need to develop a more specific understanding of your target audience. For example, if you are developing materials for a small neighborhood clinic that serves a relatively specific regional area, as opposed to a large hospital in a major metropolitan area, you may need to do some research regarding typical patient demographics for that clinic. You should also consider how the test or procedure you are writing about might suggest a narrowed sense of audience. For example, more often than not, patients considering hip replacement surgery are older adults rather than adolescents. The more specific your sense of audience is, the better prepared you will be to offer them information that meets their particular needs.

Additional OWL Resources

- Point of View
- Active Voice

Patient Education Literature Example

KNOW THE FACTS ABOUT

High Blood Pressure



What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood against your artery walls as it circulates through your body. Blood pressure normally rises and falls throughout the day, but it can cause health problems if it stays high for a long time. High blood pressure can lead to heart disease and stroke—leading causes of death in the United States.¹

Are you at risk?

One in three American adults has high blood pressure—that's an estimated 67 million people.² Anyone, including children, can develop it.

Several factors that are beyond your control can increase your risk for high blood pressure. These include your age, sex, and race or ethnicity. But you can work to reduce your risk by eating a healthy diet, maintaining a healthy weight, not smoking, and being physically active.



¹ CDC: Deaths: Final Data for 2009. www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr60/nvsr60_03.pdf

² CDC: Vital signs: awareness and treatment of uncontrolled hypertension among adults—United States, 2003–2010. www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6135a3.htm

What are the signs and symptoms?

High blood pressure usually has no warning signs or symptoms, so many people don't realize they have it. That's why it's important to visit your doctor regularly. Be sure to talk with your doctor about having your blood pressure checked.

How is high blood pressure diagnosed?

Your doctor measures your blood pressure by wrapping an inflatable cuff with a pressure gauge around your arm to squeeze the blood vessels. Then he or she listens to your pulse with a stethoscope while releasing air from the cuff. The gauge measures the pressure in the blood vessels when the heart beats (systolic) and when it rests (diastolic).

How is it treated?

If you have high blood pressure, your doctor may prescribe medication to treat it. Lifestyle changes, such as the ones listed above, can be just as important as taking medicines. Talk with your doctor about the best ways to reduce your risk for high blood pressure.

