



Patient Safety Essentials Toolkit: Ask Me 3[®]

Ask Me 3[®] is an educational program that encourages patients and families to ask three specific questions of their providers to better understand their health conditions and what they need to do to stay healthy. Providers should plan to discuss each question, and ensure their patient or advocate understands the answers:

1. What is my main problem?
2. What do I need to do?
3. Why is it important for me to do this?

Designed by health literacy experts, Ask Me 3 is intended to help patients become more active members of their health care team and to provide a critical platform to improve communications between patients, families, and health care professionals.

IHI's Patient Safety Essentials Toolkit is a helpful companion for you and your organization on the journey to delivering safe, reliable care every time, for every patient. Each of the nine tools in the toolkit includes a short description, instructions, an example, and a blank template. **NOTE:** Before filling out the template, first save the file on your computer. Then open and use that version of the tool. Otherwise, your changes will not be saved.

- Action Hierarchy (part of RCA²)
- **Ask Me 3[®]**
- Cause & Effect
- Developing Reliable Processes
- Five Whys
- Flowchart
- FMEA
- Huddles
- SBAR

Instructions

Encourage your patients or their advocates to ask the three questions when they see a health care provider, prepare for a medical procedure, or receive a medication. Talk to your patients and distribute Ask Me 3 materials at your organization.

You can also help improve communication with patients by taking these steps:

Adopt universal precautions.

Be aware of red-flag behaviors, such as patients failing to complete registration forms or being unable to explain a medication's purpose, which may indicate low health literacy. However, the absence of these cues should not be assumed to mean adequate health literacy.

Most adults struggle with low health literacy at some point in their lives. Use clear communication strategies with all patients, regardless of their apparent health literacy skills.

Slow down for better understanding. Remember that patients may not ask you to slow down.

Limit information and repeat it to promote retention of critical information. Focus on a few key points.

Avoid medical jargon. Use simple, non-medical terms: for example, consider saying "heart" instead of "cardiac," "harmless" instead of "benign," and "not a brand name" instead of "generic."

Use illustrations to explain important ideas. Pictures and graphs can reinforce key concepts and actions.

Use easy-to-read written materials for all patients.

Use active voice and simple terms.

Break up information with headings, subheadings, and bulleted lists.

Make visits interactive. Encourage patients to ask questions throughout the visit, not only at the end.

Use "teach-back" to gauge comprehension. Ask the patient to repeat the information shared. If the patient cannot explain what they have been told, assume you have not clearly communicated the information, begin a new explanation of the topic, and then ask the patient to "teach-back" the information again.

Remind patients they are not alone. Everyone wants help with health information. Asking questions helps people understand how to stay well or to get better.

Example: Ask Me 3

Read how Joe Jensen and his daughter, Rose, use the Ask Me 3 questions with Dr. Taylor, or view a [video of the exchange online](#):

- **Dr. Taylor:** Joe, I think your shortness of breath and swelling are caused by congestive heart failure. We need to schedule an echocardiogram to find out what the cause is. The echocardiogram will determine your ejection fraction and if there are any underlying issues with your heart valves. In the meantime, I'm going to start you on a couple of prescription medications for your high blood pressure and for the swelling.
- **Joe Jensen:** Okay.
- **Dr. Taylor:** Do either of you have any questions?
- **Joe Jensen:** So, I have high blood pressure. Is that my main problem?
- **Dr. Taylor:** No, high blood pressure is not your main problem. Your main problem is congestive heart failure. This condition causes your heart to be weaker and have to work harder to pump blood through your body. It can cause swelling in your legs and it can cause shortness of breath.
- **Joe Jensen:** Okay, I think my brother may have the same condition. What do I need to do?
- **Dr. Taylor:** First, before you leave, let's schedule an appointment for your test. After you leave you need to get your two prescriptions filled. And finally, you need to take your Lotensin and Lasix. I'm going to suggest that your daughter write up a schedule for your medications.
- **Rose Jensen:** A written schedule of my father's medications will help. Why is it so important for him to have the test and take these medications?
- **Dr. Taylor:** Those are really good questions. The echocardiogram will hopefully tell us exactly what's causing the heart failure. The test will also help us find out how far along the heart failure is. It's important to take your medications because you're helping your heart not work as hard. The swelling will decrease or disappear, and you're slowing down the disease. Does that help you understand why the test and medications are important?
- **Joe Jensen:** Yes. Yes, I understand. I'll make sure to schedule my test and take my medications.

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Template: Ask Me 3

[Download Ask Me 3 posters and brochures](#) in English, French, and Spanish for your organization. These materials provide an overview of the Ask Me 3 program and encourage patients to ask their health care providers the three main program questions every time they talk with a health care provider and write down the answers:

1. What is my main problem? _____
2. What do I need to do? _____
3. Why is it important for me to do this? _____

Resources

CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Health Literacy—A Public Health Priority. In: Health Literacy for Public Health Professionals.

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/training/page215.html>

HRSA (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration). Health Literacy.

<https://www.hrsa.gov/about/organization/bureaus/ohe/health-literacy/index.html>

The Joint Commission. "What Did the Doctor Say?" *Improving Health Literacy to Protect Patient Safety. A Health Care at the Crossroads Report.*

http://www.jointcommission.org/What_Did_the_Doctor_Say/

Koh H, Berwick D, Clancy C, et al. New federal policy initiatives to boost health literacy can help the nation move beyond the cycle of costly "crisis care." *Health Affairs.* 2012;31(2):434–443.

<http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/early/2012/01/18/hlthaff.2011.1169.abstract>

Roter D. Oral literacy demand of health care communication: challenges and solutions. *Nursing Outlook.* 2011;59(2):79–84. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21402203>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy. Washington, DC. 2010.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Healthy People 2010. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. 2000. Originally developed for Ratzan SC, Parker RM. Introduction. In National Library of Medicine Current Bibliographies in Medicine: Health Literacy. Selden CR, Zorn M, Ratzan SC, Parker RM, Editors. NLM Pub. No. CBM 2000-1. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2000.

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Complimentary Materials and Resources Available

IHI provides, through a non-exclusive, non-transferable license, certain Ask Me 3 materials and resources for download and distribution free of charge to aid in the promotion of health communication, including health literacy, and increased patient safety.

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