



ALERT Communication Model



Effective provider – patient communication can have a positive impact on patient satisfaction as well as adherence to medical advice. The Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Provider and Systems (CAHPS®) survey includes questions to assess patients’ perception of their provider’s communication skills. Questions assess if the provider:

- Explained things in a way that was easy to understand
- Listened carefully
- Showed respect for what the patient had to say
- Spent enough time with the patient

The ALERT Model¹ can help providers to recall the CAHPS questions and effectively communicate with their patients.

A	• Always
L	• Listen to the patient carefully
E	• Explain in an understandable way
R	• Respect what the patient says
T	• Time management perception

Always. Focus on communicating effectively with all patients. The CAHPS survey asks patients whether they felt their provider used communication skills (listed above) **never, sometimes, usually, or always**. We don't know which patients will receive the CAHPS survey, so effective communication must be used consistently across all patients.

Listen to the patient carefully. The CAHPS survey asks patients whether they felt their provider listened carefully to them. Providers can practice active listening by maintaining eye contact when the patient is speaking, using open and receptive body language, avoiding interrupting the patient, and avoiding multitasking. We encourage providers to use reflective statements ("Let me make sure I understand...", "I'm hearing you say...") to help the patient feel listened to and understood.

Explain in an understandable way. While providers may feel that they have explained something clearly, the patient may not feel the same way. Common barriers include health literacy, language barriers, mistrust, or fear. The CAHPS survey asks patients if they felt their provider explained things in a way that was easy to understand. Providers can help explain medical diagnoses and treatment by explaining the rationale for tests or treatment, using simple terminology when possible, speaking slowly, and avoiding medical jargon or abbreviations. We encourage providers to explore their patients' barriers to treatment compliance (ie: cost, transportation), check for the patients' understanding, and ask patients if they have any questions.

Respect what the patient says. The CAHPS survey asks patients if they felt their provider treated them with respect and respected their point of view. Providers should be sensitive to their patients' points of view, non-judgmental of their patients' experiences, and create an environment of trust and safety. We encourage providers to work with patients to understand their beliefs and ideas about their illness ("What do you think is causing this issue?", "What concerns you about this issue?", "How can we work together to solve this issue?") and explore the impact of the illness on their life ("How does this impact your ability to go to work or care for your family?").

Time management perception. The CAHPS survey asks patients if they felt their provider spent enough time with them during their visit. While providers may not be able to lengthen the duration of their visits, we encourage providers to focus on the quality of time spent with their patients. Providers can do so by listening to their patients and showing empathy and understanding, maintaining eye contact with the patient, allowing the patient time to speak and using open-ended questions, and avoiding appearing rushed by looking at your watch or clock.

References:

1 Hardee, J. T., & Kasper, I. K. (2008). A clinical communication strategy to enhance effectiveness and CAHPS scores: the ALERT model. *The Permanente Journal*, 12(3), 70, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3037130>

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