

Interpreter Guidelines

The role of an interpreter:

- A medical interpreter is an individual who is responsible for converting the spoken words from one language to another and should be knowledgeable about the cultures of the people he or she is interpreting for.
- A medical interpreter is committed to providing honest, confidential, and neutral interpretations that are free of personal bias.
- An interpreter does not have the same role as a translator (a person who converts written text from one language to another).

Things to keep in mind when requesting an interpreter:

- When possible, arrange to have an interpreter who is of the same sex as the patient
- Make sure that interpreters are familiar with patient confidentiality policies
- Try to arrange the seating in the room so that the interpreter can sit slightly behind the patient (emphasis should be on the patient and the interpreter should be in the background).
- Health care providers should look directly at the patient when addressing him or her and not at the interpreter.
- Allow extra time for the appointment if you need an interpreter

Interpreting and interacting with patients 101:

- Be friendly and introduce yourself to the patient as an interpreter.
- Inform the patient that you are responsible for translating everything he or she says
- Remind the patient that everything he or she says will be kept confidential
- When interpreting, speak in the **first person** as if you were speaking for the health care provider or patient.
- Try to remain in the “background” of the room (stand or sit slightly behind and to the side of the patient) and make sure the health care provider’s attention focus is on the patient.
 - Sit so that you can maintain eye contact with the patient (if culturally appropriate)
- Ask patients questions one at a time and avoid leading questions
- Avoid side conversations
 - The exception to this would be if the health care provider needs to leave the room for some reason and you are left to wait with the patient. Sometimes making small talk helps put the patient at ease.

- Speak in short sentences with frequent pauses
- Avoid using medical jargon and use easy to understand terms
 - You can use “props” or other resources to help explain such as drawings, pamphlets, charts, etc.
- It’s a good idea to use the **“listen and repeat” strategy** to confirm chart information or information gathered during the interview (i.e. a patient says they are allergic to penicillin, so you repeat back, “Your chart said that you have a penicillin allergy?”)
- After explaining a diagnosis or prescribing a medication, make sure to ask the patient if he or she has any questions.
 - Ask the patient if he or she understands the diagnosis and treatment plan
- Before allowing the patient to leave, **make sure he or she can repeat back any instructions** given (especially for medication dosing).

Interpreting tips:

- Pay attention to the information that patients provide. If there are any inconsistencies, contradictions or if the patient is frequently changing their answers to your questions, make sure to clarify what you’re asking.
- Interpreting via the phone can be challenging, but don’t get discouraged!
 - Ask the caller to speak slowly and clearly if you’re having trouble
 - Don’t hesitate to get a second opinion from another interpreter or Spanish-speaking health care provider if you’re having trouble understanding.
- Remember that obtaining accurate patient information/history is key to providing the best care possible, so when in doubt, ask!
- Sometimes patients will get off topic when you ask them a question. In these instances, it’s okay to interrupt them and gently redirect them to your original question.
- Sometimes patients will use slang that you’re not familiar with. Tell the patient you don’t understand and ask him or her to explain further.
- Try to work around the word if you don’t know the translation for it, but if you can’t, it’s important that you look it up instead of guessing.
- Prepare yourself before interpreting by **making a list of translated phrases, terms and questions** that are commonly asked/used in a medical setting (such as questions about patient history, medications, allergies, etc.). You can practice these while waiting to interpret for someone or in your free time.