



COMMUNICATION ACCESS

What is Communication Access?

Patients may have difficulty **expressing** their needs or **understanding** verbal or written communication.

Communication Access means healthcare providers use practical strategies and supports to facilitate two-way communication with patients who have speech, language or hearing difficulties. Communication may be supported through the use of visual supports such as simplified text and pictures, gestures, and slowed rate of speech.

What did patients in AHS tell us?

We asked patients who have speech, language or hearing difficulties and their care partners about their experiences in AHS. Patients felt valued when healthcare providers

- took time to clarify messages
- asked how best to communicate with them
- completed comprehension checks
- spoke to them directly (rather than a family member or support person)

They indicated that AHS healthcare providers had work to do in order to improve their care, pain management and inclusion in conversations about their health care. As a result, we are working to raise awareness of communication needs, as well as strategies and resources to increase Communication Access.

Why is Communication Access important?

- Patients with communication difficulties are more likely to report fair/poor health¹.
- They are also three times more likely to experience **preventable adverse events**² and are the most likely to experience multiple preventable adverse events.
- Patients with communication difficulties have^{3,4}
 - their symptoms, preferences, needs and concerns **misinterpreted**
 - **difficulty providing informed consent** and understanding treatment options
 - an increased frequency and duration of hospital stays, emergency department visits and office visits compared to people without communication needs^{5,6}. For example, patients with unmitigated hearing loss are 32% more likely to be readmitted to hospital within 30 days⁷
- **Many healthcare providers struggle to identify and use communication accommodations** that fit individual patient needs⁸, and frequently **misinterpret the communication abilities** of patients with speech, language and hearing challenges^{3,4}.
- Providing clinicians the right supports and tools to effectively communicate with patients has the potential to significantly improve the quality of care, patient safety, engagement and outcomes^{1,5}
- The Accessible Canada Act (Bill C-81), adopted in June 2019, indicates **we must help create** “a barrier-free Canada through identification, removal and prevention of barriers to accessibility”⁹.

Learn more at:

myhealth.alberta.ca and at ahs.ca/CommunicationAccess

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Benefits of Communication Access

- Communication access is linked to decreased frustration and improved patient satisfaction^{10,11}
- Resources and formalized instruction in patient-provider communication can lead to enhanced patient outcomes such as improved self-care and health beliefs¹¹ and increases in¹¹:
 - Accuracy of diagnosis¹¹
 - Appropriateness of treatment¹¹
 - Adherence to care plan¹¹
 - Pain management effectiveness¹²
 - Mobility and quality of life¹²
- One study estimated a potential reduction of 671,440 preventable adverse events annually in the United States; Estimated cost savings of \$6.8 billion annually¹².

How common are communication difficulties?

- Post stroke, 40% of patients will have speech difficulties and 30% have trouble using or understanding language¹³.
- Difficulties with speech and language are also common in patients with Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, dementia and many other populations. For example up to 53.9% of mechanically ventilated ICU patients met criteria for needing assistance with communication¹⁴.
- 1 in 6 Canadians have difficulty reading and understanding documents that are a single paragraph long, even when written in plain language¹⁵.
- Nearly half of Canadians have difficulty reading and understanding documents that are longer than a few paragraphs¹⁵.
- 19.2% of adults ages 20-79 have hearing loss impacting their ability to understand speech¹⁶.
- Only 12% of these patients reported using a hearing aid¹⁶.

How will I know if someone had a communication need?

A person with a speech, language or hearing difficulty may:

- hesitate, respond in ways that don't make sense, or not respond at all
- have difficulty following your directions
- frequently ask you to repeat yourself or speak louder
- wear hearing aids or use communication devices to help them speak
- use sign language or gesture as they talk
- have speech that is difficult to understand

In **addition** to having a speech, language or hearing difficulty, it's possible that the person speaks a different language or uses sign language and may need help from a professional medical interpreter.

What common strategies can support people with communication difficulties?

- Take a little extra time to listen and speak clearly. Pause often and encourage the person to take the time they need.
- Trust that the person can make their own decisions. Always speak to the person directly, even if an interpreter or a family member is present.
- The person may need help to communicate or may communicate in a different way. Ask how you can help. For example, do they prefer to use gestures, written notes or a special device to talk? Do they have access to their hearing or speech generating device? How will they communicate yes or no?

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- Say hello, introduce yourself and make sure you have the person's attention before you start talking. Make sure you are face to face. You may need to reduce noise and distractions or better position yourself so that you can hear one another.
- If you are having difficulty understanding one another, try another way. Offer a pen and paper, gesture or try a communication board. Keep written instructions concise by using short sentences and paragraphs. Use basic vocabulary and spacing between key ideas or steps.
- Check understanding – repeat back the message you think they communicated. Also have the person tell you what they heard. Summarize your conversation. Then pause to give the person extra time and ask if there is anything else they want to tell you.

For more resources, visit [AHS.ca/CommunicationAccess](https://www.ahs.ca/CommunicationAccess)

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