

# A GUIDE TO FACILITATING BETTER CONVERSATIONS WITH PATIENTS: A FOCUS ON OPEN QUESTIONS

Effective patient-centred communication requires a range of skills, which include active listening, reflection, summarizing, paraphrasing, and asking open questions.<sup>1</sup> Paraphrasing and asking open questions help you to understand things from the patient's perspective. This fact sheet provides a short summary of the current thinking and some additional suggestions for further reading.

How do you feel today?

Up to 81% of patients admit to not always being truthful with their healthcare professional to avoid being judged<sup>2</sup>

There are two types of questions that are often asked to better understand patients' goals and preferences - **Closed questions** and **Open questions**. When used effectively both have a role to play in delivering high-quality, person-centred healthcare but **Open questions** are particularly valued for their ability to elicit opinions and more rich descriptions of patient experiences. Use of effective open questions can form the cornerstone of a more motivational interview technique<sup>2</sup>, which uses discussion to uncover what matters most to patients. Used as part of any shared decision-making process it can allow you to set goals together and explain the importance of any choices made.

**Closed questions** are more interrogative in nature and should be used when a simple "Yes" or "No" answer is needed to confirm something like a name or address. It's also important to understand that some common closed questions like "**Are you taking your medicine every day?**" can feel judgmental to patients and that the answers given may not therefore always be 100% truthful.

**Table 1: List of words often used when asking closed questions with examples of questions and likely responses (adapted from AbuSabha, 2013).<sup>3</sup>**

Possible words	Closed question example	Likely response
Do/Did	Did you eat lunch today?	No
Is/Are	Are you drinking your medical nutrition every day?	Yes
Was/Were	Were you able to finish the bottle?	Mostly
Can/Could/Would	Would you like the same flavour again?	Sure
Will	Will you let me know if things don't improve?	Of course

## Open questions are better!

They encourage patients to speak in more depth about something and asking one open question can lead to another. **Open questions** invite patients to answer in ways that can help prevent them feeling judged by sparking a more honest conversation. But not all open questions are equal: some will promote discussion while others may halt it. The first step to asking effective questions is to understand the different types of open questions and use appropriately to encourage conversation.



**Open questions** that promote discussion often start with **how, when, where or what** and have the potential to cover all perspectives in a discussion when used as part of a longer phrase.

The most popular open question in healthcare is **“How do you feel?”** but even this can limit conversation to the specific health issue. Better open questions are those that bridge into a phrase like **“How is everything working out for you?”** and **“Tell me more about what you enjoy doing in your life”**. By effectively using open-ended questions embedded in phrases you will get a better understanding of the patient as an individual.

How?  
When?  
Where?  
What?

**Table 2: List of words at the start of common phrases often used when asking open questions with examples of questions (adapted from AbuSabha, 2013).<sup>3</sup>**

Possible words in phrases	Example questions
<b>What</b> would happen if...	What would happen if you stopped taking your medical nutrition?
<b>What</b> was it like for you...	What was it like for you when you were able to start getting out more?
Tell me <b>how</b> you feel about...	Tell me how do you feel about the choices we have made?
Explain <b>how</b> you...	Explain how you might feel if you started to put some weight back on?
<b>How</b> did you...	I want to better understand that last answer. Tell me how you reached this decision?
In <b>what</b> way...	In what way is taking your medical nutrition challenging for you?
<b>What</b> concerns...	What concerns you most about taking your medical nutrition?
I wonder <b>how</b> ...	I was wondering how you have been getting on with your medical nutrition?
<b>What</b> have you heard about...	What have you heard about the effects of not eating enough when you are unwell?

### Conclusion

**“All patients have stories to tell or opinions to share and most will welcome the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences.”<sup>2</sup>** This person-centred approach to healthcare using open questions and phrases to explore feelings, likes and concerns is a powerful tool that can help uncover the patient’s motivation and help you make choices together and co-own solutions. Ultimately this will enable finding the most appropriate medical nutrition solution and help to improve adherence and health outcomes. A multicentre randomized controlled trial of a health behaviour change intervention in patients with head and neck cancer was found to be effective at improving nutritional status and quality of life. Fewer treatment interruptions were also observed.<sup>4</sup>

1. Pearson D, Croker H. Changing health behaviour. In: Gandy J, Ed. Manual of Dietetic Practice. 6th ed. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2019: 23-36.
2. Levy AG, Scherer AM, Zikmund-Fisher BJ, *et al*. Prevalence of and factors associated with patient nondisclosure of medically relevant information to clinicians. JAMA Network Open. 2018;1:e185293-e185293.
3. AbuSabha R. Interviewing clients and patients: improving the skill of asking open-ended questions. J Acad Nutr Diet. 2013;113:624-633.
4. Britton B, Baker AL, Wolfenden L, *et al*. Eating as treatment (EAT): A stepped-wedge, randomized controlled trial of a health behavior change intervention provided by dietitians to improve nutrition in patients with head and neck cancer undergoing radiation therapy (TROG 12.03). Int J Radiat Oncol Biol Phys. 2019;103:353-362.